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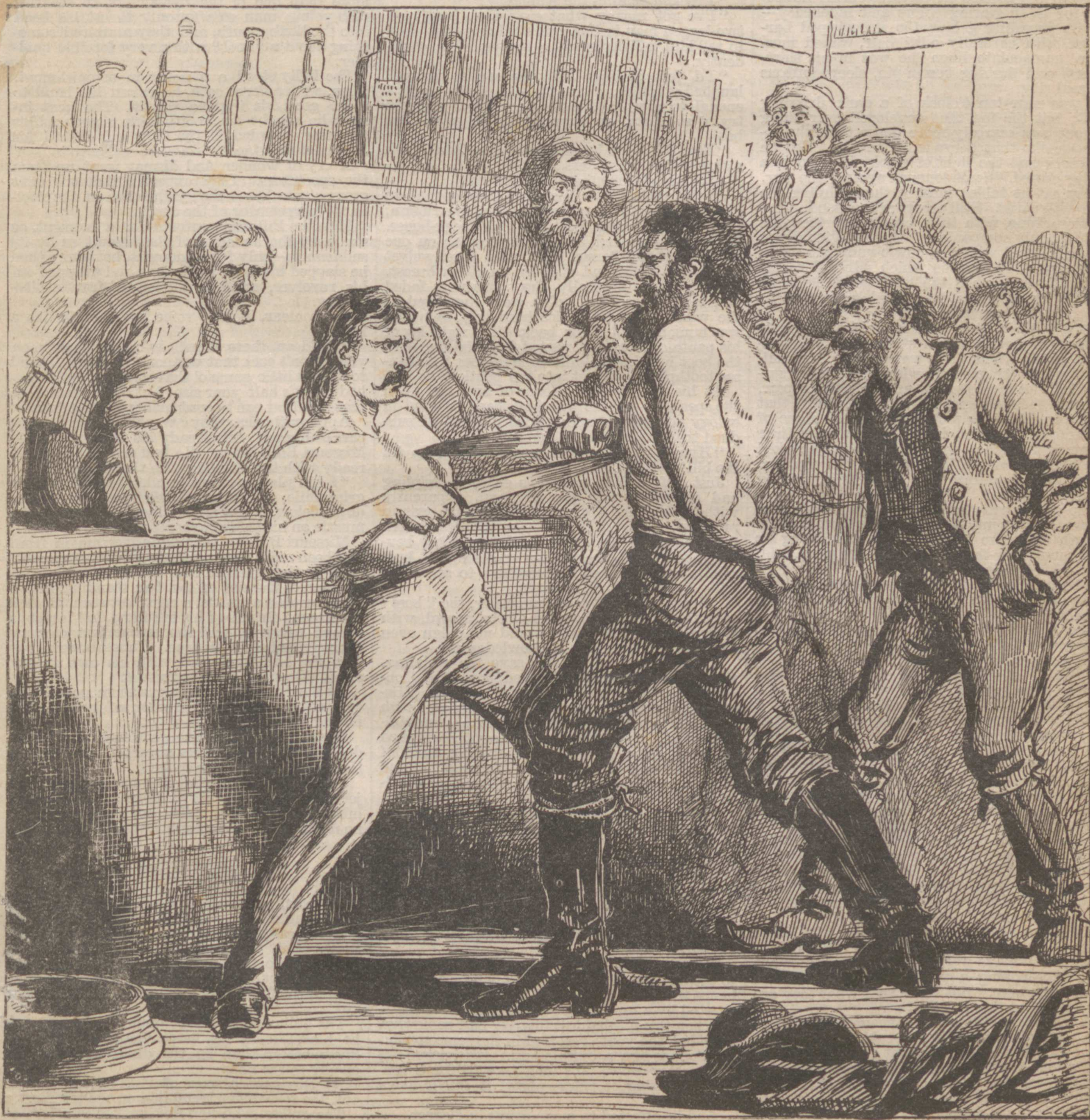
Vol. I.

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No. 1.

A Hard Crowd; or, Gentleman Sam's Sister.

A THRILLING TALE BY THE AUTHOR OF "TIGER DICK."



"ONE!" uttered Poker Tom, the Missourian's second. The room was as still as death. The Spectators stood with pale faces, bated breath and hands clenched over their weapons, with that instinct by which, in moments of such intense excitement, every brute stands on his guard. Every eye was riveted upon the contestants—every heart stood still—all felt that the next two seconds would usher in a double death.—Page 8.

A Hard Crowd; OR, GENTLEMAN SAM'S SISTER.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "TIGER DICK."

CHAPTER I.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

OMAHA was at the meridian of her glory as the "hardest place" east of Denver City. Deeds of violence were of daily occurrence. Every man was his own judge and executioner, in cases that more particularly affected himself. Where the public freedom was invaded, a short shrift and a long rope were the unfailing corrective. A fit emblem of law, in that delectable region, would have been a running noose, with bowie-knife and pistol crossed in the center.

In the low grogeries and gambling hells of the city were to be met the very scum and dregs of society—villains of every shade and variety of crime—men who carried their lives in their hand, and were ready, "at the drop of the hat," to lodge a bullet in the brain or drive a knife to the heart of their fellows. To a den of this description I invite the reader's attention.

It was a long room, its low ceiling dingy with smoke, the monotony of its rude walls relieved here and there by cuts from the illustrated papers and cheap prints in colors portraying scenes in the life of a sporting man. At one side was the bar, with its tall decanters and inverted goblets bearing lemons in the hollow of their bases—its mirror covered with pink musketo-barring, flanked by pictures chiefly noticeable for their glaring colors and indelicacy—and its presiding genius, the stereotyped bartender, with carefully oiled hair, waxed mustache, immaculate linen (he was in his shirt-sleeves) and flashing bosom-pin, sleeve-buttons and seal ring.

It was near ten o'clock of a dark, drizzling night; but the fog that enveloped everything without was scarcely more dense than the tobacco-smoke that pervaded the room. The tin reflectors cast the light of smoky lamps over a motley crowd. Some lounged against the bar. Others sat at tables, most of them whiling the time with cards. Still others sat or stood in unsocial solitude, with their cigars and thoughts for their only companions. One individual was testing his skill with the bowie-knife, throwing it at a quid of tobacco which adhered to the doorpost; and when the keen point cleft the quid fairly in twain, he smiled grimly as he imagined it a human heart.

At a table a little withdrawn from the rest sat two men with whom we will first make acquaintance. Their dress was of rude material, like that of the men by whom they were surrounded, but more cleanly and in better repair. This and their superior intelligence showed that they were wont to move in a higher plane of civilization. Indeed, in an eastern city their presence in such a den would have provoked suspicious comment; but in this rude country, where all distinctions were leveled, they passed wholly unnoticed.

The gentleman (for they were evidently gentlemen) with a military mustache blew a white wreath of smoke from his lips, and letting his eyes range over the occupants of the room, said, with a half smile:

"There'll be some hard customers to deal with at the Judgment Day, if the orthodox view is correct."

The settled melancholy of the other's face lightened a trifle, as he replied:

"I agree with you, major."

"Hush!" admonished the other, guardedly, and he slouched his hat lower over his eyes—"no titles in such a place as this. I told you I would show you a nest of rattlesnakes. What do you think of them?"

A hard light glittered in the eyes of the other, and his bearded lip quivered, as if with bitter memories, as he replied:

"My life has led me to traverse the slums of New York, dive into Baltimore's darkest dens of infamy, fathom the filth of New Orleans—I have seen men whose utter wretchedness was more marked; but about these men there is something—whether it is that they are bolder—what shall I say?—it seems as if they would do in broad daylight what the others wait for the darkness to cover."

"They're about as bad as they make 'em, I fancy," laughed the other. "You are a doctor—they may make work for you at any moment—as ugly-looking a patient as you will meet with anywhere. But let us hear what they are talking about there at the bar."

A villainous fellow with shaggy brows and tobacco-stained beard was speaking.

"I reckon the galoot what steps on Missouri Bill's toes had better git his measure took the day before," he said, looking round as if confident that no one would have the temerity to dissent from his opinion.

"I allow the cuss 'ud pass in his checks so powerful sudden, he'd be a stiff two or three days afore he made up his mind it was him," declared another, whose vivacity of imagination

elicited sundry laughing ejaculations of assent from his rude auditors.

"Who is this hyar boss sharp that everybody's laying their chips on?"

The question was put in a careless tone of voice by a man who leaned against the further end of the bar, with one foot thrown across the other, the toe touching the floor. He was of medium height, with dark wavy hair and clean-shaven face, all save a mustache which followed the curve of his lips. As he stood at repose there was nothing particularly noticeable about him; but a keen observer might have marked the firm lines about the mouth and the clear light of the gray eyes.

That any one should be uninformed as to so notorious a character as Missouri Bill occasioned universal surprise, and the questioner immediately found himself the center of observation. His question was answered by the first speaker, in a tone calculated, as intended, to impress the hearer with the degree of respect prudence would accord the man in question.

"I reckon, stranger, yeou mought be green in these hyar parts. Missouri Bill air a gay young rooster what kin jest catawamptiously chaw up any two-legged critter what dast to show his head an' crow! Hey, fellers? air that the chalk?"

"That's about the size of it, ur I'm a liar!" asseverated an individual who looked as if his veracity might be far from unimpeachable.

The stranger waved aside the smoke of his cigar, in order that he might look down the line of faces ranged along the bar; and, while his piercing eye regarded them coolly, he said, as carelessly as before:

"I reckon he ain't the Almighty!"

"I've got money what says thar hain't no two-legged man in this hyar shebang that dast to tell him so!" declared the first speaker, confidently.

"I'd jest as lieve hold the stakes, gents," laughed another; "but blowed if I'd be fool enough to cover that leetle pile with a view to tryin' so resky an experiment! I pass, you bet!"

"Boss, it's clean by me!" added a third, with a shrug of the shoulders.

And this sentiment seemed general.

At this point the door of the saloon opened, to give admittance to a tall, raw-boned ruffian, with a long, gaunt face and high cheek-bones. He wore a slouched hat, tilted very far on one side, and a red flannel shirt, with black velvet lapels and cuffs, and anchors on either breast. His trowsers, originally gray but now faded and soiled to a snuff color, were supported at the waist by a broad leathern belt, to which was hung a pistol at his back. The right leg of his pantaloons was prevented from falling over the boot by a bowie-knife—the famous "Arkansas toothpick"—thrust into the bootleg.

At his approach the silence of awe fell upon the speakers, and he who had been so loud in eulogy now gazed around with a smile of subdued triumph, as who would say:

"Hyar you have him, gents. Don't he fill the bill? Wal, I reckon!"

Just before Missouri Bill's entry a stripling had stepped up to the bar and, apparently without heeding the conversation that was in progress, ordered liquor. As the Missourian drew near, the bartender set the required beverage before his other customer somewhat hurriedly, and indicated his readiness to serve the bully by an obsequious smirk.

"Brandy!" was the laconic order, the "boss" receiving the mute homage of the crowd, with a royal nonchalance that would not deign even so much as a glance in acknowledgment.

All made way at the bar save the stripling, who seemed to be in abstracted thought and oblivious to what was going on around him. Missouri Bill took his place at the bar, and with the air of a man who was used to having "elbow-room," no matter at whose expense, pushed aside the glass of the youth, spilling some of the liquor over the counter. The other, roused from his meditations by this rudeness, demanded with angry flush:

"Look ahyar, boss! hain't you rather free an' easy with that thar big paw o' yours?"

All stood aghast at this audacious challenge, coming, too, from such a bantling.

With a port intended to be irresistibly facetious the Missourian affected to look about as if for something in the air. Then he brushed his ear with his broad palm, and ejaculated:

"Shoo, fly! ur was it a muskeeter what buzzed?"

The sycophant makes no overclose scrutiny as to the quality of the wit at which he is to laugh; hence the performance of the Missourian was greeted by a prolonged guffaw from all sides.

When this mechanical hilarity had somewhat subsided, the youth retorted in the same spirit:

"Sounds like a buffalo bull. It's tricked out like a scare-crow. It's long enough for a fish-pole. Talking of poles—phew! it smells like a polecat!"

And he affected to move away in disgust.

A quiet smile twinkled in the eyes of the stranger, who from the first had leaned carelessly against the end of the bar. He caressed his mustache with his left hand, and at the same

time the room rung with derisive laughter, coming no one knew whence.

With a scowl that Satan might have envied, Missouri Bill glanced around in quest of the man foolhardy enough to laugh at his expense. But every one looked as surprised as he, the ventriloquism of the stranger baffling them all. Then he turned upon the youth who had had the temerity to beard him thus publicly.

"An' who in blazes be you?" he demanded, with a horrible oath.

"One what don't propose to let no seven-story lubber walk over me without squealin', yeou bet!" replied the stripling, nothing daunted by the formidable front presented by the other.

"Bah! yeou wouldn't make half a mouthful, yeou wouldn't!" sneered the giant, contemptuously.

"Boss," replied the youth, jauntily, "I allow yeou've got a powerful open countenance—yeou have, so; but if you try to git away with me in two bites, even, I reckon yeou'll want to let out the job before you git through."

Again the derisive laughter rung through the room. Again was the Missourian baffled.

Then with eyes flaming like coals he turned upon his audacious antagonist.

"My young an' inexperienced friend," he said, with sarcastic deliberation, "ef yeou're a itchin' to git yeour mouth slapped, yeou kin jest git the chance at this hyar shop, an' right smart too, yeou bet!"

"Perhaps I see somebody what wants to slap it fur me—perhaps I don't!" said the youth, affecting to look around for some one to perform the office indicated.

A frown of impatience bent the brows of more than one of the bystanders, to see this rash young man so wantonly thrust his head into the lion's mouth, and they muttered something about a "fool" with a very forcible qualifier.

The bully stood a moment in astonishment. Then, with a fierce oath, he raised his hand to make good his implied threat. The next instant he caught his breath with a gasp, as his adversary warded off the blow and dashed his liquor into his face.

A cry of wonder and dismay went up from the spectators. They expected that the next moment would see the annihilation of the foolhardy perpetrator of the deed.

Missouri Bill was confused for a moment, as much by the audacity of the assault as by its suddenness—only for a moment, however; then he slapped his hand to his back and whipped out his revolver, amid a torrent of frantic blasphemy.

But a clear, incisive voice cut the air like a knife.

"Hold on, there, boss! I've got the drop on you! Don't cock that weapon. If you're bound to have a little game o' that sort, jest call somebody that's half your size; but don't pitch onto that boy that can't count inches to your feet."

Apparently the "boy" was fully able to take care of himself; for already his weapon covered Missouri Bill's heart. He had shown himself as ready with the pistol as with the glass.

"I kin play my own hand," he said with a grim smile. "I reckon they'll have a new stoker down below, if our friend hyar don't keep the muzzle on his leetle barker!"

Missouri Bill saw that the adversary in front had been more than a match for him in quickness; he then glanced over his shoulder and saw the man at the end of the bar standing in the same careless attitude, a cigar between the first and second fingers of his left hand, in his right a cocked revolver, and the smoke just clearing away from before his face. Thus between two fires, the bully remained with his own weapon at his side, not daring to raise it.

At the drawing of weapons those nearest the contestants had sought greater safety by hastily falling back.

In the corner the two gentlemen first introduced to the reader were absorbed spectators of the scene. The major spoke.

"Didn't I tell you that you might have a subject at any moment? I hope it will be that lubberly buffalo-bull. The boy's got pluck, and no mistake. A few minutes will tell the story."

CHAPTER II.

A DUEL EXTRAORDINARY.

"GENTS, yeou've got me this onc't—that's a sure-nough fact. An' I allow it hain't no disgrace fur any man to squeal when he hain't no show. But, yeou sneakin' cur behind thar, ef yeou dast to face me like a man, I kin make crow-bait out o' yeou in short meter, yeou white-livered thief, an' one pine-box 'll do fur both o' ye!"

The bully looked a very demon in his rage, as he hissed forth his fierce challenge. No one knew better than he the disadvantage of an enemy in the rear.

By this time a score of "six-shooters" were out, the fore-finger trembling on the trigger.

The ruffian who had first spoken in eulogy of the redoubtable Missourian now saw an opportunity to curry favor with him by taking his part; and he interposed in a blustering tone of voice:

"Let up thar, boss! Fair play all round! We don't stand by an' see no two onto one, yeou know—not if my name's Poker Tom—an' we think she am! Let up thar, I say! Man to man—that's squar'!"

In a twinkling, and as if in anticipation of this attack, the cigar had vanished from the left hand of the man at the end of the bar, to give place to a revolver whose muzzle frowned warningly upon the last speaker and those near him, as the weapon was aimed diagonally across its owner's right arm. Meanwhile, the pistol in his right hand never wavered an inch from the direct line to Missouri Bill's heart, and the spectators knew it.

The same quiet smile played about the man's lips. But it was purely mechanical and confined to the lips; for the steely glitter of his gray eyes showed that the tiger of his nature was on the alert. His voice, however, betrayed nothing of this in its evenly modulated tones.

"Gents," he said, "let me *persuade* you that this hyar little game is being run by a man who understands his biz, *every time*! If any one of you wants to git up a first-class funeral, let him stick up his head where I can git a squint at it, and he won't have to go *far* for the body, you bet! Don't *all* speak at once, gentlemen. Do I hear a call? Shall be happy to accommodate any six!"

Nothing cowed a crowd so quickly as a prompt challenge, backed by a "six-shooter" held in a steady hand. The men edged nervously out of range, while one said:

"Pard, I reckon we cave. This hyar hain't none o' our funeral, no how yeou kin fix it."

"I allow he's got the rope eend an' kin pitch the trump," assented a second.

"It lays between him an' Missouri Bill who's to be cock o' the walk, sure," added a third.

Poker Tom apparently yielded to popular sentiment. At any rate he was mute.

"Very well, gentlemen," replied the man at the end of the bar, in a tone of indifference. "I'm sassy when you crowd me; but stroke me the right way, an' I allow new milk ain't sweeter."

Then, addressing Missouri Bill, he continued, pleasantly:

"I'm your huckleberry, mister, for the little exchange o' civilities you hinted at. Jest put up yer little black-an'-tan, and we'll arrange for a square stand-up-an'-toe-the-mark."

Missouri Bill returned his pistol to its case, and addressed the stripling with whom his quarrel had begun.

"Jest let me git this hyar meddlesome cuss in my rear ready fur the hearse, an' I'll fix you afterward!"

Missouri Bill knew only the bully's mode of attack, which is to stamp out opposition with the heavy heel; and he addressed his other opponent with an air intended to cow him on the start.

"Well, my lark, I'm ready to lay you out in any shape you prefer. What shall it be?"

But the man at the end of the bar did not seem to cow "worth a cent." He twirled the end of his mustache carelessly, and looked with half-shut eye through the white wreath of smoke that he blew slowly from his lips.

"As the challenged party I suppose I have the right to determine the conditions of the game," he said. "But I ain't at all particular as to weapons. Pistols across the billiard table yonder, or knives toe to toe—it's all the same to me. If you have any choice, pitch the trump yourself."

He knew that a bully would have no particular relish for pistols at such close range; and Missouri Bill's reply proved that he was no exception to the rule.

"I wouldn't flip a copper fur t'other ur which," he said; "but I reckon I kin make a handsomer corpse out o' yeou with a knife—a pill makes such a cussed leetle hole!"

"All right—knives it shall be. And we'll see who makes the handsome corpse. This hyar's the way we'll fight: First, we strip to the waist. Second, our left hand is tied behind our back. Third, our left legs are tied together at the knee. At the word *ready*, we place the point of our knife on the left breast of our man just over the heart. At the word *three*, the best man wins! Is that straight?"

"It's a new game," replied Missouri Bill, paling slightly; "but if yeou're a better man than me, yeou're welcome to lay me out. I reckon thar hain't no crawfish in me."

"It's a go, then. Pick your second."

As he ceased speaking, the sharp eyes of the stranger ran over the assemblage and settled upon the companion of the major, whom we may know as Dr. Chillingworth. With a quick, springy step he went over to where the doctor sat.

"Pardner," he said, "you are a stranger to me; but I reckon I can depend on you for this little service."

The doctor felt a thrill at thus being called upon, and replied in some confusion:

"My dear sir, I hope you will not misunderstand me; for really my sympathies are all with you in this affair; but never having had any experience—"

"Oh, that won't matter. That big bully ain't

going to lay me out; so you won't have any dirty work on your hands."

"It's not that," replied the doctor, hastily. "Believe me, I would be most willing to serve you in any way in my power. But I fear I should make but a sorry second in an affair of this kind."

"Bless you, sir," replied the other, with a light laugh, "I reckon there's nothing to do but to see that no light-fingered gent goes through my pockets while my coat's off. I want an honest man; and your face struck me favorably."

The doctor was by no means sure that he was not allowing himself to be made accessory to a murder, but there is a force in public sentiment, however perverted it may be; and quieting his conscience with the reflection that, while his refusal to act could make no difference with the duel, he might on the other hand be of material service to the man in whom he had suddenly conceived a deep interest, he hastened to say:

"If you think me a competent second, consider me at your service. I will do the best I can."

"I thank you, sir. Nobody could ask more than that. And after this is over, if I can ever return the compliment, I'll try to show you that I am not quicker to forget my friends than my enemies."

Without more ado he began quietly to strip for the affray, laying his clothes on the table.

"We must always be prepared for the worst," said the doctor. "Have you papers or word of any kind that you would wish sent to your friends?"

A shade of something like sadness flitted across the face of the duelist; then his lips were compressed with bitterness as he replied:

"No. A man that's kicked about the world as many years as I have don't have many friends that 'ud care for his carcass."

"There *was* one—but, no; that was years ago. She's dead long before this, or doubtless has forgotten me, even if you could find her. No, there's not one in all the wide world."

He roused himself with a start from the dreaminess into which he had fallen while pursuing this sad retrospect; and fixing upon the doctor a piercing glance, while his chest labored with emotion, he continued:

"Did you ever think how a man—not a very wicked man on the start—might go from bad to worse, almost as if by compulsion, when he felt that he was cut loose from all the world, with nothing to live for, with no one to care whether he was up or down—when perhaps he had been wronged—bitterly wronged!—until he had lost faith in humanity?"

Dr. Chillingworth listened to his rapid utterance with a great surge of responsive emotion. Impulsively he extended his hand and grasped that of the strange man who had thus grown so near to him.

"I cannot explain the feeling," he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion. "I have known you but a moment, and yet I wish that we had met before. I feel that we could have helped each other. Have I found you but to lose you again? I wish that this danger could be averted—that I could take it upon myself. You are a young man yet. There is much before you—"

"Excuse me; but you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill," interrupted the stranger, recovering his wonted composure with a sudden effort. "If I live until that flat lays me out, I reckon I'll be older'n Methuselah."

"He's a powerful man."

"A buffalo-bull!" was the contemptuous reply.

"But if the worst should come, your name?"

"Time! Time!"

It was the voice of Poker Tom, whose vanity was mightily puffed up by his having been chosen second by the man on whom he "piled his chips, every time!" He spoke in a brisk, peremptory tone, adding a grumbling sneer at the "chin-music" his principal's adversary was indulging in.

The stranger turned upon him with a piercing glance, and said:

"Keep your shirt on, my friend. If you're itching for it, I'll give you all the time you want, after I git the other off my hands."

Then to the doctor:

"If I fall, my name will be of no consequence. Let me die as I have lived. But, one thing I ask of you. There's a miniature in my coat mounted in gold. I have worn it all my life, and I want it buried with me. It's only a fancy, perhaps; for it has led to nothing in life, and of course it can do no good in the ground; but I want it so, and I know you will humor me. But—don't let any one know it. There'd be a hundred ready to dig me up and rob me of it before I got cold—the wolves! There's money in my purse—enough to pay all expenses and more. You may keep the balance for your kindness to me, or give it to some one in need."

He drew forth the miniature of which he had spoken, and gazed upon it with a clouded brow. As he stood there with that frown of painful thought, Dr. Chillingworth started.

"What is there familiar about that face?" he mused. "Where have I met with it before? I have been prepossessed in his favor; but now I

experience a feeling of repugnance. Why is it, I wonder? Surely I cannot have known him in the past!"

His musings were interrupted by the gruff voice of Missouri Bill.

"Ef the galoot is only biddin' his sweetheart good-by, it's all right he should take his time; fur I allow he won't see her ag'in in a hurry. But ef so be he's gittin' skeery, an' wants ter crawfish—"

The stranger wheeled as if stung by the insolent tone of the speaker, and with flashing eyes and quivering nostrils, said:

"Don't flatter yourself, my impatient friend. I was only giving you time for your prayers, if you have any. If not, I'm ready to give you a lesson in fancy carving as soon as the word is given."

He hurriedly slipped the miniature back into his coat as it lay on the table. The glimpse that Dr. Chillingworth got of it showed him that it was a picture of a young and beautiful woman, painted on porcelain and mounted in an old-fashioned gold setting.

The next moment, the combatants had taken their stations in the center of the room. They placed themselves with the left foot forward, overlapping so as to bring the inside of the legs together. In this position they were securely bound just below the knee. The left arm of each was then bound to his back, and the seconds retired.

The splendid muscular development of the stranger elicited more than one murmur of admiration from the rude spectators. His skin was as white and smooth as marble, while the perfect contour of every muscle might have been the pride of any gladiator of old.

Missouri Bill saw it, too; for as his eye ran over his antagonist, as if to take his measure, he said:

"Yeou hain't no chicken, an' that's a fact; but I'll clip your wings all the same."

"When I spit you on this little rib-tickler, I reckon you'll think you are a *goose*," was the grim rejoinder—"and *gone* *goose* at that!"

An angry flash came into the eye of Missouri Bill, at the contemptuous smile of his adversary.

"Do yeou know who I be?" he demanded, pompously.

"No; I don't usually make the acquaintance of such fellows as you are. But I know one thing about you, though."

"An' what's that?"

"I know you're a big fool to think that bull-strength stands any show against science."

"Gents, air you ready?" called Missouri Bill's second, in a melodramatic tone.

"I'll give yeou 'science' enough, before you git through!" hissed the Missourian, with dilating nostrils and a sudden purple flush, as he placed the keen point of his weapon against the naked breast of his adversary.

A taunting smile was the only reply; and the stranger deliberately placed the point of his bowie-knife on the other's breast, so that it made a just-perceptible indentation in the flesh between the ribs. Then he fixed his eyes upon those of his opponent with a sudden, fascinating intensity that made the color visibly recede from the Missourian's face.

"And now," he hissed, while his eyes glittered like those of a basilisk, "do you know me?"

"Yeou? The devil! no. Who are yeou?"

"Why don't you say—'*Caramba, no!*'—Ricardo del Selano?"

The stranger emphasized his words with a stinging sneer.

Missouri Bill started violently and paled to the lips.

"Ha!" he aspirated, with a gasp.

"So you know me?"

"Curse you! no."

"Look closely."

"I have never seen you."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"Ha! ha! Your memory is treacherous."

"Curse you! what do you know of me as Ricardo del Selano?"

"Have you forgotten so soon?"

The stranger seemed to enjoy the torture of suspense to which he was subjecting his antagonist. Every moment was making Missouri Bill's nerves more unsteady. He spoke in a sharp, rasping voice, while his white lips quivered with a mysterious terror.

"The foul fiend seize you! Speak! Speak! At what are you hinting?"

In that moment of intense excitement he seemed unconsciously to drop the Western dialect out of his speech, which showed that it was only affected when he did use it.

The stranger smiled as he noticed this, and pursued:

"I have not forgotten. I might have squared accounts with you a while ago; and you would have died in your forgetfulness. But I wish you to remember. How strange that you should have forgotten so soon!"

Missouri Bill burst forth in a torrent of wild oaths.

Without seeming to heed him, the stranger continued, as if communing with himself:

"Ten years ago to-night!"

A strange hush fell upon the Missourian. His blasphemous tongue seemed suddenly paralyzed. His lips were livid, his eyes protruding, his very breath stayed.

The stranger pursued in the same tone:

"May 16th, 18—."

A wild yell of terror drowned his voice, and Missouri Bill leaped backward, but was restrained by the ligature that bound his leg to that of his adversary.

The face of the stranger underwent a sudden change. All the bantering, sneering expression passed away to give place to the stern implacability of the avenger. His voice was clear, cutting, merciless.

"Stand up and face your doom like a man," he cried, "unless you are a coward as well as a scoundrel!"

Missouri Bill struggled to overcome the terror that had paralyzed him; but he stood quivering from head to foot.

"Air the boss a-goin' ter crawfish?" asked one of the spectators in a suppressed whisper.

"Crawfish nothin'!" declared Poker Tom, with an indignant frown at this reflection on the courage of his principal.

"I reckon the t'other'n has got the deadwood on him some'r's."

"Jim Sluggins, air you a-givin' of us wind, ur talkin'?" demanded Poker Tom, pulling a roll of money from the watch-pocket of his trowsers.

"I've got a sawbuck what says thar hain't no wind hyar," replied Jim, following suit.

"Put it thar, boss," said Poker Tom, placing his money in the hands of the barkeeper.

"Pard, thar she am!" said Mr. Sluggins, depositing his money with a confident air. "Yeou're boun' ter lose; fur ther boss is skeered out sure!"

As these words, accompanied by a low chuckle, reached his ear, Missouri Bill rallied with a purple flush of cheek and brow.

"I reckon no man don't call time on me twice without gettin' his reg'lar allowance," he said with a swagger. "Jim Sluggins, you'd better git your measure took; fur yeou come next, ur I'm a liar!"

Jim paled slightly at this threat; but he knew that he was "in for it," and that nothing he could now say would make the matter any worse; so with an outward appearance of coolness, while he mentally cursed his indiscretion, he said, with a shrug:

"I allow yeou're gittin' a good deal on yeou're hands, fur—"

"Gents, air you ready?" interrupted Poker Tom, who did not wish the man on whom his money was staked to be further irritated.

Without a word the combatants again got into position. Their breasts, bared by tying their left arms behind their backs, seemed to court death. The doctor, accustomed as he was to death in all its hideous forms, could scarcely repress a shudder as he looked at them.

"One!" uttered the Missourian's second.

The room was as still as death. The spectators stood with pale faces, bated breath, and hands clenched over their weapons, with that instinct by which, in moments of such intense excitement, every brute stands on his guard against all his fellows. Every eye was riveted upon the contestants—every heart stood still—all felt that the next two seconds would usher in a double death.

Every vestige of color had left the Missourian's face. His lips were tightly compressed; his eyes glowed beneath his black brows like living coals. He now seemed for the first time to realize the full extent of his awful peril. He felt that he must die; but he resolved that there should be no survivor.

As for his antagonist, not a muscle quivered; not a change was visible in his face.

"Two!"

The Missourian leaned forward, to give impetus to the thrust which he meant should search out his adversary's heart. He did not seem to feel the keen point against which his breast pressed until the blood started through the punctured skin.

The stranger was a man of rock.

"Three!"

A wild yell of triumph burst from the excited partisans of Missouri Bill, and a score of weapons leaped from their places in that frenzied moment, when their champion made a ferocious lunge and his adversary sunk to the floor on his right knee. The blood rushed back upon Dr. Chillingworth's heart with a force that made his head swim, as his imagination pictured a warm, pulsing heart cloven in twain by the murderous bowie. But the yell died away in a groan of horror, and the blood leaped again to the doctor's extremities.

As he sunk backward and downward, the stranger had, with the rapidity of lightning, turned the point of his weapon from his adversary's breast, and plunged it into the Missourian's forearm, striking the bone, and thrusting the arm to one side while he shrunk away in the opposite direction. Instantly he rose again, his deadly weapon now directed with fatal aim. The upward thrust of the bowie, as its keen point sought the breast that bent above him, was seconded by the whole force of his body, his breast pressing against the hilt.

Without a murmur, with only a convulsive quiver and a demoniac contortion of his brutal features, the Missourian fell backward upon the floor, with a heavy thud, stone dead!

CHAPTER III.

GENTLEMAN SAM'S SISTER.

AND now let us turn back a few hours, to the morning of the most tragical evening in the Occidental Saloon.

No indication of the storm which made the dreariness of that bloody night, had yet appeared. On the contrary, the sun looked down as brightly as if its face would never be obscured by brooding clouds.

Nature responded gladly to this genial influence. The grass wore its greenest beauty; the flowers nodded pleasantly to the passing breeze; the trees rustled their leaflets in quiet enjoyment; and the throats of the many-colored denizens of their cool retreats swelled almost to bursting with their grateful songs.

Bowered by the dense foliage that denied ingress to the sun, and half-smothered by clambering vines, a rude hut hid from the eye of the passer-by on the dusty highway, deep in the seclusion of the woods.

Before the low door of this sequestered abode a young girl, decked in rather fanciful costume, almost as varied in coloring as the plumage of the birds that flitted fearlessly in her vicinity, sat in the saddle, tapping her dress abstractedly with her riding-whip, while her horse champed his bit, and tossed his head and stamped impatiently to dislodge the flies that pestered him.

In the doorway stood a woman, older by a quarter of a century, perhaps. Her face yet bore traces of early beauty, now much faded by long suffering. Her cheeks were pale and her eyes sunken. In the latter feature was a vague something—whether their restless wandering; or their intense brilliancy—which constrained a second glance and inspired a feeling anything but comfortable.

"Jo," she said, addressing the girl; and her voice had in it the impatient asperity of the invalid—"Jo, shall you be gone long? I almost despair of anything coming of all our years of search. I begin to fear—"

The woman broke off with a sort of sob, while the tears started weakly in her eyes.

"What do you fear, aunty?" asked the girl, coming out of her reverie with ready sympathy.

The woman's eye wandered aimlessly a moment, before she answered:

"That my boy has changed so that we might meet him face to face, and yet not know him."

"Don't fear that, Aunt Kate," said the girl, consolingly. "You would know him; and I think—I am almost sure I should."

"It has been a weary search. So many years!—so many years! And the world is so big—oh, so big!" complained the woman.

The girl urged her horse forward, and, bending, kissed the woman on the forehead.

"Wait, aunty," she said, in a soothing tone. "We may find him any day. Who knows?"

The elder woman seemed to lean upon the strength of the younger one. Taking her ungauntleted hand, she pressed it to her cheek, while she murmured, with fresh tears:

"Jo, you are always so good. What could I do without you? And you will bring him back to me, some day? Oh, I know you will! Dear child!—dear child!"

"There! there, aunty!" said the girl, herself much moved by this display of affection. "You'll let me go now. And I'll be back again, almost before you begin to miss me."

She gathered up the rein, touched her horse with the whip, and was gone.

Tearfully the woman watched her until she was hidden by the foliage, then turned wearily into the hut.

Half an hour later the girl was cantering through the unpaved streets of the town, attracting looks of recognition and admiration from the rude pedestrians on the plank sidewalks and from the equally rude shopkeepers lounging idly in their doorways.

Before the Occidental Saloon that fair morning stood a man of military bearing, to whom we have already been introduced in the person of Major Gravesend. The girl's somewhat fanciful attire first caught his eye; but, when she had approached near enough so that he could distinguish her features everything else was forgotten in the rapt contemplation of her rare loveliness.

As she passed, his eyes devoured her, until the magnetism of his gaze drew her eye upon him. His fixed regard seemed to annoy her; for she flushed and her eye flashed. Then with a slight accession of hauteur and a tremulousness of the lip, as if on the point of curling in scorn, she looked straight before her and rode on.

When she had passed, a deep breath showed how profound had been the effect on the major. While his eyes yet followed her receding figure, noting with the appreciation of a connoisseur her graceful conformity to the motions of her horse, he addressed the keeper of the saloon, Andy Blake, who sat on the door-sill teasing a terrier pup.

"Who is that?"

"Eh? That? Oh, that's Gentleman Sam's sister," replied Andy, looking up.

And with that spirit of his class which invests the community with the borrowed luster of a local celebrity, and pluming himself accordingly as a member of the community, he added, briskly:

"But, hain't she about as peart as they make 'em? Bet a hoss they cain't show her match within a radius of a few miles—eh, boss?"

"Gentleman Sam?" repeated the major interrogatively, passing over Andy's comments.

"Hain't heard o' him, stranger? Wal, he's a mite of a chick you'd think yeou could put in a pint mug; but lay yer pile he's a hull team when he's mad! They're a pretty pair, as like as two peas, an' hot as coals to handle—both on 'em."

"Where do they live?" asked the major.

"That I don't adzackly know," replied the barkeeper. "It's some'r's up country, two ur three mile. You don't often see Sam an' his sister together. Thar's a lunny what lives with 'em, they call Mad Kate; an' one on 'em stays along o' her, mostly, while the other comes to town. But when they do parade in company they're a pair o' high-steppers as hain't matched every day, you bet!"

"But is it safe for so beautiful a woman to traverse a lonely country road unprotected?"

"Safe!" repeated Andy, with a chuckle.

"This is a pretty tough community, isn't it? Suppose one of the five gentlemen who hang around here should take it into his head to run away with her?"

"Run away with Gentleman Sam's sister?" repeated Andy in amaze. "Lord love ye!" he added with a laugh and a shrug, "I allow it 'ud take a few o' the loudest sharps west o' the Mississippi to git away with her! I'd qualify she kin call any six, an' give 'em long odds in the bargain! Why, gosh all fish-hooks, stranger! it 'ud 'a' made yeou jest git right up an' howl, to 'a' seen the leetle fracas she had with Sandy Bob. Sandy, he war the toughest old grizzly that ever crossed the Rocky Mount'ns; but, bless yer soul, he knowed the p'int of a purty hoss ur a purty woman!"

"Wal, Sandy he clapped his eyes on to Gentleman Sam's sister one day, an' he jest gin one long whistle, an' come waltzin' up to her like a dancin' master. He took off his hat an' bowed untel he was nearly double, and he says, says he:

"'Hollo, little gal! does yer mother know ye're out? Let me interduce to you the Great Original Sandy Bob, president of a Sand Bank, from Sandstone Peak, an' inventor o' sandwiches! I hain't no great shakes on purty myself; but when I see an angel, like you, fur instance—um! but it makes my mouth water!"

"Then he stood a-grinnin' at her, an' a-wipin' of his mouth on the back o' his hand."

"Wal, she jest gin him a look what 'ud 'a' cleaned out any seven men in this hyar section o' country, an' made fur to walk around him. But, nothin' 'ud do but he must have a kiss; so he says, says he:

"'Hold yer hosses, my purty! Yeou hain't a-goin' by this hyar gate without payin' tole, no-how yeou kin fix it."

"And he went fur to grab hold of her."

"Je-e-rusalem! yeou'd orter 'a' seen her eyes snap! She jest steps back, an' she says, says she:

"'Stand aside, yeou fool! I don't want ter take the life o' such a worthless villain as you be!"

"But Sandy, he jest yells with laughter, an' makes a dive for her! She jumped to one side, as spry as a cat, an' fired a Derringer as he stumbled past her, carryin' away his upper lip an' four front teeth, as slick as a whistle! Sandy rolled on the ground, bellerin' like a buffalo-bull. Gentleman Sam's sister pushed him with her foot, contemptuous-like, as if he was so much dirt; an' when he rolled over so's she could see how he was fixed, she says, says she:

"'I reckon yeou won't kiss nobody for some time to come."

"An' with that she sails off down the street, as if nothin' had happened."

"When we come to tell Gentleman Sam, he says, says he:

"'Gents, I reckon my sister is able to take keer of herself. If any man thinks different, jest let him pitch onto her, any time he's a mind to. He has my permission."

"She's quite an Amazon," remarked the major, thinking how little such a warlike display accorded with the gentle expression of her face. "But, what is her name? You refer to her only as 'Gentleman Sam's sister.'"

"I reckon thar don't nobody know no more than that," replied Andy; "leastways that's the extent o' my pile."

After a few more questions which discovered that Andy had indeed reached the end of his information, and the lady having passed from view, the major sauntered toward his hotel with the air of a man in deep meditation.

Meanwhile, Gentleman Sam's sister had come under the notice of a man with an even more brigandish air than usual, derived from his

heavy black whiskers and the sinister frown that darkened his brows. That he was no common ruffian was evident from the intellectual cut of feature; but, falling from a greater altitude, he had sunk to greater depths of infamy than his less gifted fellows.

At the moment he was walking rapidly, with his eyes on the ground, his hands clenched and his features working excitedly.

"Curse him!" he muttered, below his breath; "who is he? The sight of him thrills me strangely. There is something in his bearing that seems familiar. Where in the past have I met such a man? In any event, why do I hate or— Is it fear? Bah! I am afraid of no man! If I had but seen his face. I'm sorry, now, that I did not follow him."

Chancing to look up at this point of his meditations, he saw the girl whom we have described riding by.

"Fiends!" he ejaculated, stopping short in his brisk walk. "Who is this with such a face? Is this country enchanted? I meet some haunting face at every turn."

His gloomy frown of a moment before had suddenly been dispersed by a lift of the brows, expressive of wonder and expectancy. Clutching the post of a wooden awning, he glared intently at the face presented to him in the profile, the attention of the girl being attracted to the opposite side of the street, so that she did not see him.

"Who in the Fiend's name is that?" he demanded, breathlessly, turning sharply upon the proprietor of the grocery before which he stood.

"Eh? What?" asked the man, startled by his vehemence into forgetfulness of the game of quoits which was occupying his idleness.

"That—that—woman?—girl?—what is she?"

"That? Oh, that's Gentleman Sam's sister. A clipper!—five stories an' a basement!" replied the man, mixing his metaphor somewhat.

"An' who in blazes is Gentleman Sam's sister?" demanded the first speaker, impatiently.

"Wal, I reckon that tells the whole story—jest that an' no more—Gentleman Sam's sister."

"Where does she live? What does she do? Who is she?" pursued the first speaker, biting his lip.

"Boss, I'll never tell!" replied the shopkeeper, with a grin. Then, catching an ominous gleam in the eye of his interlocutor, he added, "I reckon nobody don't know nothin' about her n'r him. They're two odd chicks as hoes their own row an' is labeled—'hands off!'"

Without deigning a reply, the interrogator turned upon his heel and strode off, more rapidly than before, on his morning walk.

"Great Cain, Bob, your ha'r set light fur a minute!" said one of the quit-players, addressing his colleague with a grin.

"Sho! what fur?" asked the other.

"Do you know who that bang-up sharp is?"

"No. Who in thunder is he?"

"One as 'ud jest as leave shove a rib-tickler up under your jacket, I reckon, as to stow away tripple-X tanglefoot—THE RED HAND!"

"Sho! you're a-jokin'!"

But the speaker paled visibly. Meanwhile, The Red Hand, as he was called, passed over the ground with long, rapid strides, until he came to a saloon before which half a dozen horses were tied. Uttering a peculiar whistle he vaulted into the saddle of one, and set off at a brisk trot.

His signal soon met with a response; for, issuing from the saloon, five fellows quickly bestrode the remaining animals, and followed him at a pace which would enable them to overtake him.

Other patrons of the groggery lounged to the door and followed the retreating forms of the riders with sullen looks; and as they swept along the street more than one brow darkened with a frown of suspicion, if not of fear. Evidently they were in no great favor in the town.

Meanwhile, the leader of this gang was meditating, his dark face expressive of exultant triumph and merciless cruelty.

"By the gods of war!—if it is she! And it must be! She is her mother's very image, a thousand-fold beautified—purified. Ha! ha! what a revenge!—to possess her! If her mother were only alive to witness our nuptials! But her father is somewhere on the earth; and he shall know! When I have secured her I will hunt him up. Ha! ha! we'll be quits, after all these years! He has had his day. I had a taste of mine; but now I am coming into its full fruition."

"Gentleman Sam's sister! I must look into that. Some alliance more romantic than reputable, I am afraid; for I cannot be deceived in the person. Perhaps my revenge may come in that way. There is everything in association, in spite of the cant about blood. The taste displayed in her dress is rather loud; and yet, by Jove! it's becoming, and harmonious in its way."

At this point he was interrupted by the galloping pace of his followers. Drawing rein slightly, he allowed them to come to his side.

One of the gang was below the average stature of men, yet small in other respects, so as to be symmetrical. He had sharp-cut features almost hidden behind his bushy whiskers. One would

have said that he would make a far more formidable enemy than his larger and duller companions. He rode next the chief, as by right. Him the leader addressed.

"Larry," he said, "where is Missouri Bill?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "Somewhere about town. He left us an hour ago."

"Hunt him up and bring him to the rendezvous. I have work for him. Stop! Do you see that woman riding yonder?"

Nebraska Larry, for such was the name by which he was known, glanced down the street and saw the girl whom we have already described. A scarcely perceptible cloud passed over his face, as he said:

"Yes. Well?"

"They call her Gentleman Sam's sister. I want you to follow her—she lives in the country somewhere about, in hiding, I suspect—and, when you can without awakening suspicion, capture her. Take Joe and Quickstep with you. See that you treat her with every courtesy; but she must be blindfolded, of course, when approaching the Retreat. Now, off with you, and report as soon as you have accomplished your task."

"Sam and Dave, keep with me—or, better yet, let us scatter, and look up Missouri Bill. There is famous work before us, pals. If we succeed, you shall not be without your reward."

Leaving the chief and his followers, Nebraska Larry rode ahead of the men who were to accompany him. There was an expression on his face which he did not care to have them see.

"Here is another!" he muttered, between his clenched teeth, and added with repressed fierceness:—"How long, oh Lord! how long!"

It required skillful maneuvering for three men to follow a woman under that mid-day sun, all being mounted; but Nebraska Larry proved himself equal to the task. Watching Gentleman Sam's sister for some time, until she left the town, Larry allowed her then to get out of sight, but followed after, purposing to come up with her when she was beyond the chance of assistance.

His company had left the town two miles in her rear when he urged them to a gallop, keeping on the greensward at the side of the road, where the tread of their horses could not be heard, so as not to alarm the pursued.

"There she is, men!" he cried, suddenly, catching sight of her at a turn in the road.

Gentleman Sam's sister had drawn her horse back upon his haunches, and was gazing intently down the road. Several sharp reports in quick succession gave some indication of what was engaging her attention.

"What's that? Pistols!" exclaimed Quickstep. "Somebody's in hot water."

A yell sounded from beyond the curve.

"That's some of our gang, for sure!" cried Joe.

"Forward, men!" commanded Nebraska Larry. "We'll bag our quarry, and perhaps help our own men."

Digging his spurs into his horse's flanks he took the middle of the road, followed by his satellites.

Hearing the regular thud of horses' hoofs, Gentleman Sam's sister turned her head and saw three men rushing down upon her at a swinging gallop.

Joe and Quickstep gave an answering yell to their pals, convincing the girl that they were colleagues. The next instant her horse leaped forward, carrying her out of sight beyond the curve, discharging a pistol down the road before her as she disappeared.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGER.

LET us return to the Occidental Saloon, on that terrible night. An awestruck silence, in weird contrast with the recent shout that had died away in so dismal a howl, fell upon the crowd. A moment thus, and then Jim Sluggins leaped into the air and struck his feet together thrice ere he again reached the floor, yelling:

"Rake stakes, by thunder! an' my treat all round!"

"Hold yer hosses, thar; that's foul!" shouted Poker Tom.

The conqueror, retaining hold of his weapon as his antagonist fell, had drawn it from the breast where its point had searched out the secret springs of life. With a slash of the reeking knife he had cut the cord which bound him to the dead, wiped its bloody blade on the trowsers of his fallen foe, and turned toward his breathless second, as cool as if a score of hearts had not stood still and then leaped almost to bursting, only a moment before.

A single word had escaped his lips, spoken with the iron implacability of a Nemesis:

"ONE!"

Dr. Chillingworth had half extended his hand in congratulation, and, again overcome by that mysterious repugnance with which the face of the other when clouded by a frown inspired him, had let it fall to his side. But the arrested motion passed unobserved; for at that instant the words of Poker Tom fell upon the ear of the stranger.

Instantly he wheeled round, and, with the eye of a lion-tamer, demanded:

"What do I understand you to say?"

With the example of his dead principal before his eyes, a glance was sufficient to cow Poker Tom; and with the cringing air of a whipped cur he replied:

"Pard, I allow it's all squar'. Ef so be yeou're minded to set up as cock o' the walk, I reckon thar won't nobody interfere."

To Jim Sluggins he added:

"The money's yeourn, an' welcome."

"Set 'em up fur the boys, Andy," cried the jubilant Jim, "an' sling the balance over. Quick come, quick go!—a nimble penny wants to be kep' warm. Stand up in a line, hyar, boys! Roll up, tumble up! any way to git up! Strangers, I allow we don't want no suckin' thumbs in a corner. This hyar pison's prime an' free as the air ye breathe! Come up an' le's have a jingle all roun'!"

The last words were addressed to Dr. Chillingworth and Major Gravesend, who had not responded to the hospitable invitation as promptly as the rest.

"Etiquette demands compliance of us. It's drink or fight in this delectable region," whispered the major; and he and the doctor ranged themselves with the rest forthwith.

"Hyar's to—" began Jim Sluggins, raising his glass, and then paused and looked inquiringly at the hero of the hour.

"The Stranger," was the quiet reply, with a slight inclination of the head.

Every one looked a little surprised at the mystery with which the man chose to surround himself; but in the West, men get used to almost everything; and with a slight elevation of the brows, Jim continued:

"Hyar's to The Stranger—may he never want fur a squar' meal ur a toothful o' pison!"

When this characteristic toast was drunk off, Dr. Chillingworth and the major resumed their seats, while the other occupants of the room gathered in small knots and discussed in low tones the tragedy which had just been enacted in their presence, with looks of awe at the ghastly corpse which lay in the center of the floor, and of curiosity and respect at the conqueror.

The Stranger was detained a moment longer at the bar by Jim Sluggins, who grasped his hand enthusiastically and cried:

"Boss, that war the purtiest dodge I ever see! Ef it warn't I'll eat my head—dinged ef I don't! Lord! when I see that buffaler-calf a-takin' water, I wanted a million to put up on yer!—blowed ef I didn't!"

The Stranger made a common-place reply, and getting away from his admirer, turned to resume his clothes.

Some of the sternness had now passed out of his face, and Dr. Chillingworth felt the interest which he had at first experienced for the man take the place of the repugnance excited by his frown, sufficiently to permit him to extend his hand and say:

"Let me congratulate you on the fortunate issue of this affair. I can almost say that you have done society a service by ridding it of such a viper."

"I've rubbed out an old score, and that's all the satisfaction I ask," replied The Stranger.

Again that look which caused Dr. Chillingworth to shrink away almost shuddering with disgust.

"Where have I seen that face?" he thought, as The Stranger was donning his clothes. "Is it hatred that I feel, or what? Yet at other times I feel as if I should like him as a friend. It is very strange. I cannot understand it."

A slight puncture just over the heart, and running from it a white scratch, where the point of the bowie had ranged across his breast, but not deep enough to draw blood, were the only marks The Stranger bore from the terrible encounter. When he had resumed his clothes, he carelessly lighted a cigar, and turning to the doctor said:

"Sir, I never forget a friend, though I sometimes forgive a foe. If in the future you ever stand in need, believe me, I shall be ready, even with my life, if necessary."

Again the doctor felt the impulse strong upon him to seek to know more of this man; but at the remembrance of that strange frown he checked the feeling, and let him depart without further advances.

With the imperturbable coolness that characterized his every movement, The Stranger turned and walked toward the door; but he was intercepted by the stripling in whose quarrel he had interfered.

"Pardner," said the youth, in a sweet, liquid voice, "I reckon I owe you thanks for laying out that lubberly galoot. It was a dirty job, but you done it jest the purtiest out—you did, fur a fact!"

The Stranger stopped and took the proffered hand of the youth. As he pressed it in his firm grasp, he started and looked at it. It was as small and shapely as a woman's, though browned by exposure. The build of the youth was in keeping. He was below the medium height, yet slender in proportion. He wore a broad-brimmed felt hat, set jauntily on his head. About his shoulders was huddled, in an odd sort of fashion, a blanket like a Mexican serape,

looking as if it would impede his movements, though he did not seem embarrassed by it. For the rest, he wore top boots that came to the knee, and his weapons appeared secured by a belt.

Something like interest came into the eyes of the duelist as he gazed; and he replied in a cordial tone:

"You owe me no thanks, since I was pursuing my own purposes. You're a dauntless little cuss, yourself. What must I call you? But, what does it matter? I may never see you again."

The old misanthropic look returned to his countenance, and the hard lines reappeared about his lips as he half turned away.

The eyes of the youth flashed angrily. His delicate pink nostrils grew white and quivered with resentment. He drew himself erect with a gesture that made more than one of the rude spectators think him fit to be a young prince; and his voice was tremulous with wounded vanity, as he replied:

"Stranger, if you don't care to know my handle—"

The duelist turned suddenly and bent upon the youngster a penetrating scrutiny. He had that rare, magnetic glance, that calm gravity of look which abates passion. With a quiet dignity which made all who saw it feel that he was not of them, though mingling with them, he extended his hand and said:

"I beg your pardon. It was a momentary weakness. I am not indifferent. On the contrary your coolness has caused me to feel a lively interest in you. What shall I call you if we chance to meet again?"

A smile like a burst of sunshine lit up the face of the youth. Impulsively he clasped the extended hand of The Stranger in both his small ones.

"Oh, we shall meet fast enough," he said. "But—do you really care to know?"

How like a girl's his voice sounded. He looked shyly out from under his long, curved lashes; and the color came into his cheeks as soft as the blushes of a maiden. But for the silken, black mustache and the bluish speckson cheek and chin with which some faces always bear testimony of the shaven beard, The Stranger could almost have supposed himself in the presence of a woman. Looking at him, he said to himself:

"What a little sensitive-plant! He has been transplanted in rude soil, I fear. Ah, well! life is full of strange vicissitudes."

Aloud he said:

"Certainly. I should very much like to know your name, if you do not object."

"Well, I've had a score of names, I reckon—a new one in every place—Gentleman Sam, Dandy Tom, Patent-leather Joe, and so on. But a moment ago you said I was *dauntless*. I like that better than any of the rest. Suppose you call me that."

"Dauntless? Dauntless what?"

"Oh, almost any handle'll fit—Tom, Dick, or Jerry."

"Jerry let it be, then. Dauntless Jerry! I don't believe I've heard the last of that name. Good-night!"

With that he turned, and drawing up his coat-collar, stepped across the threshold out into the drizzling rain of the murky night.

The youth called after him:

"If you have, I lose my guess! But ain't you going to return the compliment? What am I to tell folks when they ask who chawed up the biggest bully in seven counties?"

All paused for the reply. Turning and glancing over the expectant faces the duelist said:

"If any one asks you, tell them it was—a stranger."

A moment, and the night had swallowed him up in its blackness.

"What do you think of him?" asked the doctor of Major Gravesend, while a murmur of disappointment ran round the room.

With a shrug the major replied:

"It's one of the many curious phases of human nature a man meets with in this Western country. Had he said his name was John Smith, he would have been forgotten by to-morrow; but, as 'The Stranger,' it will not take long for him to become quite a celebrity."

"I should think not, if he carves up men like that every day," replied the doctor.

"Humph! One such exploit may give a man a reputation which will last a lifetime. Rumor will multiply it a hundred fold, until there is a prevalent opinion that he lays out his man every morning before breakfast, just to get an appetite. The simple name of 'The Stranger' will be a greater protection to him than if he were a walking arsenal."

"No one can deny that he is a cool hand. But I suppose we have seen all there is to see to-night. Shall we return to the hotel? It is late."

"If you please."

As the major rose something slipped from the folds of his cloak and fell upon the floor. The doctor picked it up with a sharp exclamation.

"Ha! The Stranger's picture."

And he held up the miniature.

"In replacing it in his pocket he must have—"

But he never finished the sentence. No sooner did his eyes rest upon the delicately delineated

features than he stopped and gazed as if fascinated.

"What is it?" asked the major, struck by his strange behavior.

But Dr. Chillingworth did not heed, if indeed he heard him.

At the same moment the door of the saloon was thrown violently open, and a dark-browed ruffian entered with a swagger that showed that he meant to have his own way, "or know the reason why."

Instantly a hush fell upon the crowd, while an apprehensive whisper ran from man to man:

"THE RED HAND!"

He had taken but two steps within the room, when his eyes fell upon the ghastly corpse which still lay untouched in the center of the floor. An instant he stood like a man of stone, his eyes distended with wonder and incredulity; then with a fierce oath he leaped forward, and kneeling beside the dead man, raised his limp hand from the floor.

While the eyes of the crowd were riveted upon this scene, Dauntless Jerry glided up to Dr. Chillingworth, and plucking him by the sleeve, said hurriedly:

"Pardner, I guess we'd better not make ourselves so numerous around hyer, if we know what's healthy. That thar galoot's a reg'lar old grizzly, you bet! and he'll jest naterally chaw up everything an' everybody that had a hand in rubbin' out his 'ard, sure!"

But the doctor seemed deaf to all appeals, even when Major Gravesend attempted to lead him from the room.

"Stranger, you'll git massacred, sure!" urged Dauntless Jerry.

Something in his voice caught the doctor's ear, and he looked up, gazing full in the youth's face.

One strange proceeding must here be mentioned. Notwithstanding his evident desire that The Stranger should take an interest in him, Dauntless Jerry had, during all their interview, kept his back to the light, and his broad-brimmed hat slouched over his brows, so that, in the uncertain light of the place, The Stranger had had no clear view of his face. Now, however, the youth's hat was tossed back, and the light from a lamp, just above the table at which the doctor and major had been sitting, fell full upon his countenance.

At something which he saw there, all the color faded from Dr. Chillingworth's face, and clutching the youth by the shoulder, with a hand that shook as with palsy, he cried:

"Boy, in heaven's name, who are you?"

Jerry started back in dismay at the intense emotion of the other; but, had he answered, his voice would have been drowned by a yell of blasphemous rage that rung through the room.

"Show me the man that did this! Show him to me, and I'll tear his black heart out of his body!"

And THE RED HAND leaped to his feet, foaming at the mouth as he glared around.

CHAPTER V.

THE RED HAND.

It was a strange spectacle. The bartender had abandoned his post to mingle with the crowd outside the bar, apprehensive that his conspicuous position might make him a target for the unreasoning rage of the ruffian who, in the first moment of wild passion, might seek at random some victim upon whom to wreak his vengeance. The patrons of the saloon, in no less trepidation, had shrunk away toward the sides of the wall, no one desiring to attract particular attention to himself.

In the center of the open space lay the inanimate and bloody form of the vanquished duelist. His eyes, half open, were covered with the dull, bluish glaze of death, and his heavy brows wore a scowl even more hideous than when in life. From his pierced breast had ebbed the red tide of life, until it lay upon the floor in a dull, clotted pool. All unconscious now the hand that still grasped the murderous knife—all nerveless the arm that but a moment ago sought to give it a fatal impulse!

Above him stood the man whose bloody deeds had earned for him the name of THE RED HAND. His top boots, armed with Mexican spurs, the array of weapons in his belt, his broad brimmed slouched hat, and above all his shaggy black brows and disordered beard, gave him a brigandish appearance, and went far to produce the terror his presence inspired in the breasts of the rude men with whom he came in contact. At present he stood with cocked pistol, his form quivering, his eyes blazing with fury; and might fitly have personated some fiend of destruction.

"Speak, you cowardly curs!" he yelled, in a voice of thunder. "Who has done this deed?"

"Pardner, I reckon I—"

"Air yeou the man?" demanded The Red Hand, instantly covering the heart of Poker Tom with his pistol.

"No! no!" yelled the terrified Tom, throwing up his hands in token of amity.

"Is he the man?" persisted The Red Hand, referring to the crowd, while his finger still trembled on the trigger.

"No!" responded a chorus of voices, raised to a yell through excitement.

The Red Hand seemed to lower his weapon with reluctance.

"What do you know about it?" he demanded, with unabated fury. "Speak quick, ur I'll bore you anyway!"

"Regretting his share in the affray, and not assured that it would not eventuate in his death, Poker Tom hastened to say:

"It was in a squar' set-to, an' he chose me fur his second."

"You acted as his second in a fight?"

"That's it, boss. I'd spoke a good word fur 'im afore he come in. I had money what said thar wa'n't no two-legged galoot in these hyar parts what dast to look squint-eyed at Missouri Bill, an'—"

"Did some one pick a quarrel with him?"

"Wal, no—not adzackly. Yer see he pushed ther boy's whisky aside, an' ther leetle cuss tuck it up right peert, an'—"

"Boy! What boy? No boy did that! Do yeou take me fur a fool?"

"Hold on, boss. The boy didn't do it."

"Didn't yeou say a boy? Come, out with it." And The Red Hand fingered the trigger of his weapon nervously and scowled a black menace.

"I didn't say that ther boy done it," replied Poker Tom, with the nervousness of a man who is handling a hot coal.

"What did yeou say?" yelled The Red Hand.

"Why, yer see the boy tuck it up, an' allowed as how he was a-usin' of his paw too free."

"Well! well! Cut yeour story short! What of it?"

"Then Bill he made fur to cuff the feller's years; but ther leetle cuss he flung his drink into Bill's face quicker'n greased lightnin'!"

"A boy?"

"A chap of eighteen ur twenty, I reckon."

"Flung his whisky into Missouri Bill's face?"

The astonishment of The Red Hand plainly amounted to incredulity.

"That's what he done," declared Poker Tom.

"I reckon everybody see'd it plain enough."

"And did Bill shoot the leetle idiot? Where is he?"

"Wal, no. He—"

"Didn't shoot him? Air yeou lyin' to me? Do yeou mean to say that Missouri Bill 'ud stand any such thing from any man alive?—much less a boy!"

"Wal, yer see Bill he drawered on him; but the other feller he got ther drop on Bill from behind, an' 'ud 'a' salted him afore—"

"The other feller? What other feller?"

"I reckon thar don't nobody know his proper handle; but he called hisself Ther Stranger."

"Humph! What was he like?—short or tall—heavy or light? Describe him!"

"Wal, he wan't so tallish, nur yet so short, neither. But he was *nerve-y*, yeou bet! I'd qualify a lick from his bunch o' fives 'ud feel like a kick from a blind—"

"Stow yer opinions! Wa'n't thar any ear-marks?"

"He had dark brown hair, a mustache o' the same, gray eyes—onless I disremember—"

"Perdition! Any man might have dark hair an' gray eyes!"

"Now I think on it, he had a scar on the left temple—"

"Hah! Dark hair, gray eyes an' a scar on the left temple? Was he here? When? Where is he?"

The Red Hand held his weapon in readiness, and glared around as if he expected some secreted foe to spring forth and confront him. Was it fear or hatred that blanched his face and made his form tremble. The spectators were puzzled to determine.

"He wa'n't gone two minutes when you come in," replied Poker Tom.

"And this is *his* work?"

"I reckon he done it."

"How did it come about? Make few words!—I can't stop hyar all night!"

"Bein's that The Stranger had got the dead-wood on him in a way that didn't leave him no show, Bill challenged him fur a squar' stand-up-an'-toe-the-mark. The Stranger allowed he could stand that; so Bill he tuck me fur his second, and The Stranger he tuck the gent over thar in the corner—"

"Who?" cried The Red Hand.

Instantly he wheeled, glared for a moment upon Dr. Chillingworth, and then leaped forward with a howl of fury, his revolver exploding at the same instant.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FAIR RESCUER.

ONE more retrogression, dear reader, and then our story will march steadily forward to its denouement.

The Red Hand and the major were not the only persons who were struck by the appearance of Gentleman Sam's sister as she rode into town one bright and beautiful morning. Seated on the steps of the hotel, while the girl rode by, was the man who in the evening announced himself as The Stranger. He was quietly smoking, as seemed to be his custom, and, without appearing to, watching everything that went on about him.

His face, when in repose, wore a cynical ex-

pression, as the face of one who felt that the world had given him stabs in the back instead of meeting him fairly face to face.

Suddenly it lighted up wonderfully, a wave of enthusiastic admiration sweeping over it and transfiguring it. All the apathy of the moment before fled, carrying the bitterness with it.

"Great Heaven!" he muttered—"what a vision! Was ever anything more lovely! What beauty of form and coloring—what grace—what rare delicacy!"

His eyes were riveted on Gentleman Sam's sister with an eagerness that drank in every charm. He noted the poise of the head—the firm yet delicate touch on the bridle rein—the graceful conformity of the body to the motions of the horse.

His intent gaze drew the eye of Gentleman Sam's sister. She started, then flushed—not with vexation, he knew. No; for a half-smile of pleasure parted her lips, while her eyes lingered, as if by some subtle fascination.

Then came a deeper flush, and her eyes were turned away evidently with an effort. The Stranger felt with a heart-thrill that the attraction was mutual.

On rode the girl, with her face set resolutely down the street. She knew that he was following her with his eyes, and could hardly prevent her own from seeking his again.

"He is a man!" she mused. He is brave, I know, and true to the death. What a contrast with these beasts of prey, who call themselves men, by which we are surrounded!"

Meanwhile, The Stranger had arisen, keenly interested.

"I must know her," he mused. "I have traveled the world to find such a woman. In all the thousands she is the first worthy of the name. Hallo, landlord! Who is that?"

"Who? Where?" asked the landlord, starting out of a doze, and gazing about in bewilderment.

In that instant The Stranger's mind underwent a sudden revolution. The old cynicism came back, more bitter by way of reaction from that momentary lightning.

"Bah!" he sneered, "it is of no consequence." And beneath his breath:

"She would turn out like all the rest. I've had slaps enough to rest content, one would think."

Then aloud, again:

"Have a cigar?"

And he tossed one to the landlord, as compensation for having disturbed his slumbers.

As if the sight of Gentleman Sam's sister had introduced a train of disagreeable thoughts, The Stranger walked off down the street, chewing the end of his cigar, the while a painful frown contracted his brows.

"Like all the rest!" he muttered—"fair and hollow-hearted."

He had gone scarcely two blocks when a company of five men galloped by. They were The Red Hand, Missouri Bill, and three of their followers. Missouri Bill was in advance, The Red Hand following in conversation with one of the men.

When The Red Hand saw The Stranger he threw his horse upon his haunches, uttering a sudden exclamation of wonder.

So absorbed was The Stranger in his own thoughts that he paid no heed to the riders, nor did he know that he had attracted such marked regards from one of their number. Unconscious, he kept on down the street, while The Red Hand following him with a scowl of malignant hatred, muttered:

"Three times and out! And this time I know my man! It is the devil's favor that I have stumbled upon him without his seeing me. But he is so changed that, but for that scowl, I might have passed him by unrecognized. There are but few men with a frown like his."

Then turning to the men, he said:

"Here, La Platte Jake, tell Bill to set about the business I gave him to do, and come you with me."

The man rode forward to where Missouri Bill had drawn rein, delivered his message and returned.

The Red Hand and his satellite now dismounted, hitched their horses and began to dog the footsteps of The Stranger.

Soon he left the town, walking along the country road with his eyes fixed meditatively on the ground.

"He's our mutton!" exclaimed The Red Hand, exultantly. "This is the last that'll be seen of him. No man don't cross my path and live long to blab about it!"

With rapid strides, he and La Platte Jake sought again their horses, leaped into the saddle, and dashed out of town by another road.

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the danger that threatened him, The Stranger rode on, taking the road traversed a little later by Gentleman Sam's sister. An hour's walk took him into the depths of the woods, when an abrupt challenge roused him from his meditations.

Starting and looking up, he saw a masked rider just issuing from the undergrowth that skirted the road. The horseman wheeled in the middle of the road and presented a cocked pistol.

"Throw up your hands, you doggaumed whelp! I reckon you're my meat!" was his challenge.

The Stranger glanced over his shoulder, at the sound of a breaking twig in his rear, and saw a second rider, also in mask, come into the road behind him. A frowning pistol made his purpose sufficiently plain. Evidently, The Stranger was surrounded.

Most men would have blanched before such an assault. The Stranger was made of no such stuff. Besides, something in the voice of the challenger awoke a strange thrill in his breast.

"I've heard that voice before!" flashed through his mind. "It means death to me now, surrender or not. Well, if die it is, I'll not be shot like a dog, at any rate!"

Without a word in response, he leaped to one side, drawing his pistol and firing it at the same instant.

Shots from front and rear replied, and with a yell The Red Hand—for it was he—dug his spurs into his horse for a charge.

The Stranger fired again.

With a cry of pain and terror, The Red Hand's horse stumbled to his knees, then struggled to his feet and leaped to one side at a third flash from The Stranger's pistol. So abrupt were the movements of the agile animal that The Red Hand was unseated, and would have fallen to the ground but for a foot clinging to the stirrup and a hand clutched in the horse's mane. Panic-stricken, the animal sped past The Stranger at a pace that prevented his master from regaining his position in the saddle.

Yelling to increase his terror, The Stranger turned to see why the other enemy had not followed up the attack and put a bullet through his back.

But the fellow was already down in the road on his face, dead, seemingly, and a young girl—the same The Stranger had seen riding through the town—was clutching the bridle of his horse, in that moment of bewilderment between finding itself riderless and running away.

"Quick! Mount and away!" cried Gentleman Sam's sister. "There are others around the curve, coming down upon us like the wind!"

The Stranger needed no second bidding. Running beside the horse, like a circus rider, he vaulted lightly into the saddle.

A flash of admiration lighted the girl's eyes, as she witnessed his horsemanship. Then she gave the bridle-rein into his hand and struck her own horse with her whip. This was in a measure to cover a flush that leaped to her cheek, called there by a look in The Stranger's dark eyes that devoured her face.

This second and nearer view of her acted like magic. He saw her animated face and eyes flashing with excitement; and before her heroic loveliness his cynicism fled away into forgetfulness.

"Thanks, lady," he said, gallant and self-possessed, even in the imminent danger that menaced them. "Do I owe my life to you? Was it your hand that squared the accounts of that villain?"

"I did not wish to kill him, and I hope I have not," she replied; "but it seemed to be your life or his; so I fired the shot."

"It was bravely done," said The Stranger. "Few of your sex would have had the nerve and address."

Further conversation was interrupted by a yell, as four horsemen swept around the curve in hot pursuit.

The horse of The Red Hand had been checked by Nebraska Larry, and the chagrined chief allowed to assume an easier position for rapid riding. Then, wild with rage, The Red Hand had wheeled his horse, and bidding the others, in no very elegant phrase, to follow, spurred his horse to a frantic gallop, grinding oaths and ribaldry between his teeth.

But his horse, though a good one, was wounded, and soon began to show signs of weakness from loss of blood. All useless to goad him cruelly with the spur; oaths and execrations were but empty air; he fell behind. Not, however, until he stumbled and fell from exhaustion did the baffled and enraged ruffian give over the chase.

But, we leave him with his chagrin, to follow the pursued.

The danger, left behind, for the time at least, had almost slipped out of the minds of The Stranger and his fair rescuer. Both had evidently seen peril before; and once beyond the reach of immediate harm, they gave themselves up to pleasanter thoughts.

Far enough beyond pistol range to apprehend no injury, though yet pursued, they yielded themselves to those sweet sensations which attend the birth of mutual love. To The Stranger Gentleman Sam's sister was a dream of loveliness, grace, purity—a revelation of all that is compassed in that beautiful word *woman*; while the girl's heart swelled with a new, delicious joy, as it enthroned him king.

"Lady," said he, with a strange feeling of reverence upon him, "I owe you my life, and it is but fitting that it should henceforth be dedicated to you. May I know whom I am to serve?"

A flush overspread the girl's face, accompanied by a look of pain. Could she mar those first delightful moments by telling him that she rested under a cloud of doubt? But her innate truth and bravery asserted themselves. If they were to be friends—for then she had no other conscious thought—there must be no false views between them. If he valued her not according to her own worth, then was he unworthy.

Turning, then—not, however, without humid eyes, tremulous lips, and a shade of bitterness in her voice—she said:

"Who am I? I am what you see. I can tell you no more. Others boast their lineage—I have none. I never knew even a mother's love. I have not a known relative in all the whole world."

Unconsciously The Stranger drew nearer her.

"I can sympathize with you," he said, his face displaying blended emotions, a sort of gladness struggling with its pain. "We are at one there. I never knew a mother's love."

"Indeed!" said the girl. "How I pity you!" And, in her sorrow, she extended her hand, to rest it on his arm.

Thrilled to his heart of hearts by the light touch which, though she knew it not, meant so much, The Stranger bent swiftly and touched the back of her hand with his lips.

It was an impulsive act. He had not thought to startle the emotions which were unconsciously taking form in her breast. He saw his want of consideration when she snatched her hand away with a quick cry, and reined her horse further from him.

"Pardon me," he said, retrieving his error as best he could. "I have had but few words of kindness in my desolate life. It was but the measure of my gratitude that one true woman should really give me her friendship."

His words were well chosen. Any woman, especially a young one, would respond to such an appeal. His life was desolate, lacking the balm of womanly sympathy. How richly would she endow him of her abundance!

Her bosom swelled with an emotion that made her eyes humid. She drew nearer him again, all her confidence restored, and was about to make he knew not what eloquent reply; but at that instant a hurtling sound reached their ears.

The Stranger knew the sound. Before he saw it, he knew that a long line was running out from the roadside, and, at its end, a circling noose was ready to drop about himself or his companion, if not both.

He raised his eyes just in time to see the danger, thrust forth his arm and strike the noose, so as to save the girl, she assisting his purpose by swaying her body to one side. At the same instant he threw his horse upon his haunches, and bowed himself to the animal's withers.

As it was, the lariat nearly plucked him from the saddle as it scraped his back and shoulders. But the horse received a part of the shock, the loop falling partly over his head, as he tossed it in the air, wrenching his neck violently and completely terrifying him.

A yell from their enemies showed that they were witnesses to this new attack on the pursued; and instantly afterward the caster of the lasso emerged from the undergrowth at the side of the road, with presented pistol.

With a wild snort of pain and terror The Stranger's horse dashed down one of the forks of the road, while the animal ridden by Gentleman Sam's sister, in spite of her efforts to the contrary, took the other. An ineffectual shot from the new foe only served to quicken the pace of the terrified animals.

The Stranger had just consciousness enough to cling to his horse, without attempting to guide him, while he was being borne he knew not whither. His bewildered brain could form but an imperfect conception of time. An interval of he knew not how long was terminated by a shock; and all was a blank.

When The Stranger recovered consciousness he found himself lying beside the road, while the animal he had bestridden nibbled the coarse grass beside him. The bough of an oak, so riven by the lightning that it stretched out dangerously across the way, indicated how he had been swept from the horse's back, while the bridle, twisted about his wrist, showed why he had not been abandoned by the animal.

Far down the road, where it disappeared over the crest of a hill, he could see the darkening West, the sun having disappeared behind the clouds, that left only here and there patches of dingy sky yet visible. Judging from this, he had lain there for several hours unconscious.

Rising, stiff and sore with his fall and the constrained position in which he had lain while the dew fell heavy and chill, he mounted his horse and retraced his steps toward the fork of the road where he had become separated from Gentleman Sam's sister. Evidently his foes had given over the pursuit of him. Had she too escaped? Or had they left him to pursue her more closely?

A ride of scarcely a mile brought him to the spot he sought; but in the gathering gloom he searched fruitlessly for indications of the girl's fate. In vain he looked for some spot where the hoof-prints would show that the pursuers had stopped to gather round their comrade of

the lasso. A quarter of a mile down the road which Gentleman Sam's sister had taken, he found where a horse had fallen and struggled to his feet again; but then the night settled down, hurrying clouds bringing swift darkness, and he was denied time to study its significance.

With a feeling in his breast, when he thought of the girl whose fate was thus involved in uncertainty, which he would not have thought possible on so short an acquaintance, and inspired by one whose name even he did not yet know, he turned, to retrace his steps to the town he had left that afternoon, on foot; and to confront his assailants again, that very night, in a remarkable manner.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RED HAND IN CHANCERY.

CONCURRENT with the scene depicted in the fifth chapter was the by-play in which Dr. Chillingworth, Major Gravesend, and Dauntless Jerry were engaged.

With the mysterious picture in one hand, and holding Dauntless Jerry by the shoulder with the other, Dr. Chillingworth gazed into the face of the youth with a look in which memory was groping through the shadows of the past for some lost clue.

Dauntless Jerry offered no resistance, nor did he have recourse to his weapons, with which he was usually so ready. He shrunk away, not with apprehension, but only startled with the suddenness of the doctor's clutch.

Not heeding the wild yell of the Red Hand, which prevented Jerry from replying, Dr. Chillingworth repeated his question, unconsciously shaking the youth in the intensity of his emotion.

"Boy! boy!" he cried, "who are you? What are you?"

"I reckon I hain't nothin' but what you see," replied Dauntless Jerry, the danger which threatened himself and the doctor for the moment driven from his mind by the magnetic power of his interlocutor's passion.

"But your parents—who are they?—where are they?"

"Gov'nor, I allow I'll have to pass. I've been up that stump a heap o' times; an' I never got no further than yeou be at the present writin'."

"Are not they living? Where is your home?"

"Stumped ag'in, boss, by the fust question. As fur t'other, I reckon my home's wherever I git my washin' done, by the law o' the State."

"But your family—your father and mother?"

"I reckon I never had none."

"Never had a father and mother?"

"Leastways, they've never come to chalk, to my knowledge."

"Don't you know who your parents are?"

"Never seen nobody what claimed me. Reckon they've got lost, if thar ever was anybody what I belonged to. Do you know any sich? I allow I'd like to find 'em jest fur the curiosity o' the thing."

Dauntless Jerry looked wistfully into the doctor's face. A new hope was springing up in his breast, that rendered him oblivious to the vicinity of The Red Hand, and to the mischief it might portend for him.

The doctor gazed into his face, forgetful of everything else, and, as if communing with himself, said, in a hoarse whisper:

"Who is it? Where have I seen it before? Why does it affect me so? It eludes me continually; and yet I seem so near. Great Heaven! is it hopeless?"

Then he gazed in silence until his eyes became suffused with tears from sheer disappointment.

Dauntless Jerry returned his fixed gaze, standing perfectly still, scarcely daring to breathe, lest he should break the chain of the other's thoughts. He saw the tears start in the doctor's eyes, and the lines of care deepen, until he looked like an old man in his despondency. Then, thinking that he might aid his memory, he ventured to ask:

"Do I look like any one yeou used to know?—a man or a woman?"

The doctor dashed the tears from his eyes, and lifting the youth's hat, gazed at him even more earnestly.

The boy's brow was as white as snow, though the lower part of his face was bronzed by exposure. In marked contrast with his forehead was the jet black hair that lay in silken rings.

An odd expression flitted across his face and he flushed slightly, as he said:

"Never mind the ha'r—that might be almost any color. But do I look like any one yeou ever knowed?"

Sympathetic tears came to his eyes, as he turned his face so that the light could fall full upon it, in his eagerness to assist the other's memory.

Suddenly a great wave of crimson swept across his face; and with a startled look he averted his face again, and snatching his hat from the doctor put it on so that it shaded his features.

In his disappointment Doctor Chillingworth forgot to feel surprise at this strange procedure. He only shook his head despondently and said:

"I don't know. I can't tell. It baffles me completely. It is hopeless—hopeless!"

At this point they were interrupted by the voice of Major Gravesend, who called out warningly:

"Look out! We're in for it!"

Doctor Chillingworth and Dauntless Jerry turned just in time to see The Red Hand crouching like an animal about to spring, his wolfish eyes riveted upon the doctor, his left hand clutching the hilt of his bowie-knife, while in his right a cocked revolver hung at his side.

With a yell that began in a rattling growl and swelled into a perfect shriek of fury, the ruffian leaped toward his intended victim, unconsciously pulling upon the trigger, so that the bullet was discharged through the floor at his feet. Dropping the revolver and transferring the bowie-knife to his right hand, he came on, his eyes blazing, his white teeth glittering through his tangled beard.

Called so suddenly from his painful thoughts into the presence of such imminent danger, the doctor was helpless in his bewilderment, and made no effort to avoid the murderous attack. To save him, Major Gravesend drew his revolver and shot at the advancing ruffian. But Dauntless Jerry was even quicker than he. Standing nearer the center of the room than did the doctor, he leaped to one side, and, as The Red Hand passed him, stuck out his foot, over which the ruffian tripped, falling just in time to escape the major's bullet.

The Red Hand came to the floor with a crash, jabbing the point of his bowie-knife far into the boards. With a wild oath he was about to spring to his feet and renew the attack; but the cold muzzle of a revolver was pressed to his temple, and a clear, ringing voice commanded:

"Stidy, thar, boss! ur yeour carcass'll have a beauty-spot what won't wash off! Ef I should take a notion to lay yeou along side o' Missouri Bill, I reckon you don't stand no show; so yeou'd better obey orders!"

It was Dauntless Jerry whose activity had proved equal to the emergency. As he stood over the prostrate villain, holding the cocked revolver at his head, his face white, his nostrils quivering with passion, yet his arm as steady as an arm of bronze, the major, even the doctor, could not help marking his rare beauty.

When he saw that The Red Hand comprehended his situation, Dauntless Jerry stepped back a pace, still, however, covering the ruffian with his weapon. Then, without removing his eyes from the head which he intended to perforate if necessary, he addressed his friends:

"Gents," he said, "this hyar's a mighty on-healthy place. I reckon yeou'd better slope, ef yeou want to git out with whole skins!"

"But you must save yourself," cried the doctor, now having recovered himself. "We can't abandon you in this den of wolves."

"Come on. I reckon I'm nearest the door," replied Jerry, backing toward the entrance of the saloon, yet still preserving his aim.

All this had transpired so rapidly, that thus far Poker Tom had stood in bewilderment. But, seeing his champion down, and well knowing that if he failed to come to his support at such a time the capricious-tempered Red Hand might on some future occasion "take it out of his hide," he deemed it "healthy" for him to make some demonstration; and flourishing his "six-shooter," he cried:

"Fellers, air we a-goin' to stand by an' see three dogs onto one? Not ef the court knows herself, an' we think she do! Let up, thar, yeou doggauned whelps! For'ard, fellers, an' we'll rub 'em out hand over fist!"

"Salt that yelpin' cur—he's all bark!" cried Dauntless Jerry. "Let the wind out o' him, an' come on!"

At this instant The Red Hand pressed his tongue against his teeth and blew a note that rung shrilly through the room.

"Boss, I don't want to salt yeou—I'd hate to, like p'ison," cried Dauntless Jerry; "but I reckon I'll have to. Ef we git another whimper out o' yeou—"

But he was interrupted by an answering whistle from the street, and the sound of rapidly approaching feet.

With one leap backward he reached the door and shot the bolt.

"Take the back door!" he cried, "an' drop everybody that stands in the way! Lively! Lively!"

In the one instant while Dauntless Jerry was in the act of leaping backward and his aim was unsteady, Red Hand started to his knees and clutched his remaining pistol.

"Take yeou're hand off o' thar, yeou devil! ur yeou're a dead man! TAKE IT OFF!"

The Red Hand had turned his head, so as to glare with bloodshot eyes over his shoulder at his youthful conqueror. He saw the white determination in the beautiful face—the merciless glitter in the eye that glanced along the pistol-barrel with unerring aim—heard the metallic ring in the clear voice; and knowing that an instant's hesitation would seal his doom, he removed his hand from the butt of his pistol, with a scowl that Satan might have envied, grinding out a fierce oath of impotent rage between his clenched teeth.

On the other hand, while he would have shot the ruffian without a qualm if necessary, Daunt-

less Jerry knew that the security of himself and friends lay in not firing the first shot, if it could be avoided. An energetic warlike display on the part of even three men, who were known to be fighting only on the defensive, might cow the whole unorganized mob which occupied the room, having no particular interest in opposing them; but a single shot, which looked as if they were assuming the offensive, might draw upon them a volley from the crowd—as several dogs will watch one another with grinning teeth until the snapping of one brings on a general engagement.

"I'm with yeou, gents!" cried Dauntless Jerry to his friends. "Pass them as minds their own business; but drop every coyote what proposes to take a hand in the game; an' don't waste two shots on one man!"

A rallying cry sounded in the street and the footfalls were just at the door. Encouraged by the prospect of help, and desirous of showing his zeal for The Red Hand, Poker Tom started forward with an answering cry.

"Rescue! Rescue!" he shouted. "Hurray! we'll wipe the doggauned varmints out!"

But he was met by Major Gravesend, who advanced with a cocked pistol in either hand.

"Clear the way!" he cried, making straight for the back door of the saloon. "We make war only on those who war against us!"

He was seconded by Doctor Chillingworth, who cried:

"Stand aside! If you compel us to shoot, your death will be on your own head!"

Looking down the throats of four revolvers, Poker Tom "caved"—in other words, he fell back precipitately among the crowd, his face livid with fear. This was the signal for the mob to divide; and they backed off toward the sides of the room, leaving a clear avenue to the back door.

Meanwhile, Dauntless Jerry, keeping The Red Hand covered with his revolver, had passed round him, and was following his friends through the crowd, walking backward. It required nerve to keep his eye upon one man, trusting to his friends to prevent any one of the score who surrounded them from shooting him; but, Dauntless Jerry was equal to the task, and not a glance to the right or left betrayed any uneasiness on his part.

Still kneeling where he first fell, the blazing eyes of The Red Hand were following Jerry with the tireless vigilance of a tiger's; and he knew that a momentary diversion of his attention would give the ruffian an opportunity to spring to his feet with leveled weapon and rob him of the advantage he now held.

But, already the door was shaken by ruffians from without. Then a heavy shoulder made it creak in every joint. A momentary pause, and the door came in with a crash, ushering five brutal-looking cut-throats pell-mell into the room; and, reckless of the danger, The Red Hand leaped to his feet with a yell, just as Major Gravesend raised the latch of the door.

Instantly six pistols were brought into range. The crowd surged further apart, each man trying to shield himself behind his neighbor.

"Down! Down!" cried Dauntless Jerry, as the door swung open.

Six sheets of flame almost simultaneously lit the further end of the saloon, followed by a cloud of white smoke, and the room rung with the report of small arms. But the bullets pattered harmlessly against the walls, or sped through the open door. The doctor and major had both taken Dauntless Jerry's warning, and dropped out of danger.

Then out through the smoke bounded The Red Hand, with his cut-throat crew at his heels, while Jerry and his friends leaped through the doorway, the ever-thoughtful Jerry pulling the door to after him.

Wild with rage, The Red Hand tore open the door, determined to continue the pursuit. But as he was crossing the threshold, a fist shot from the darkness, taking him fairly between the eyes and felling him to the floor. The flash of his pistol, discharged without aim, lit for an instant the face of Dr. Chillingworth; then a hand grasped him by the ankle, and he was drawn bodily from the room, while a voice from out the darkness cried in clear, ringing tones:

"The galoot what attempts to pass that doorway is a dead man!"

The ruffian followers of The Red Hand stopped short. No one chose to make of himself so fair a target as to pass through the door with the lamp light full upon him. But a device was hit upon.

"Out with the lights!" cried a voice; and in ten seconds the room was in total darkness.

Then came a blind rush for the door—a confused jostling—oaths—blows—and finally the ringing report of a pistol, followed by a shriek of mortal agony from some luckless fellow who had "stopped a bullet!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MISSOURI BILL IS "PLANTED IN CHRISTIAN STYLE."

When the saloon door closed behind Dauntless Jerry and his friends, Dr. Chillingworth suddenly exclaimed:

"Major, I want that man, and we must try and capture him. Stand by me, now as you are my friend."

"In heaven's name, what do you purpose to do? You can't take him alive. He has half a dozen villains at his back who will stop at nothing."

"I must try!" replied the doctor, laconically. "Gineral," cried Dauntless Jerry, "better take a fool's advice an' git while yeou kin! You'll git bounced, sure!"

But the doctor was not to be won from his purpose. Taking his revolver by the barrel, he stepped back to the left-hand side of the door. No sooner was he in position than the door was torn open by The Red Hand. Like a flash the doctor struck him fairly between the eyes, and the next instant had pulled him from the room.

"Lend a hand, major," he cried.

Major Gravesend sprang forward and grasped the other foot; and together they ran, dragging the unconscious villain after them, and leaving Dauntless Jerry to cover their retreat.

That quick-witted individual took in the situation at a glance, and uttered the menace which deterred The Red Hand's pals for a moment. But when the lights went out, he cried:

"Gineral, the jig's up! They're a-comin' sure! Drop the carcass, an' light out hot foot!"

His voice attracted one of The Red Hand's followers, who bounded toward him with an oath, discharging his pistol as he ran.

Jerry had no desire to kill any one unless forced to do so in self-defense, and feeling secure in the darkness, he took to his heels with a shout of derisive laughter.

"Peg away, ole hoss!" he cried. "All down but nine!"

He would have joined his friends, but was intercepted by the men who rushed from the saloon, and so took the opposite direction.

Meanwhile, Dr. Chillingworth and Major Gravesend found themselves greatly embarrassed by the burden they were trying to drag off. All the advantage gained by the darkness was lost by the unavoidable noise made in dragging so heavy a body over the ground, and they were soon short of wind and hard pressed by their foes beside.

"Hyar they air, boys! Come on!" yelled a voice, and a pistol ball whistled by the doctor's head, as a dark form appeared bounding toward him.

An answering shout came from near at hand, and then the rush of hurried feet and several pistol shots in rapid succession.

"This will never do!" cried the major, letting go the leg he held. "We can't more than escape unimpeded."

For answer, Dr. Chillingworth loosened his hold on The Red Hand, and drawing both his pistols, fired several rapid shots at the approaching shadows. A yell of pain showed that at least one of the shots had taken effect. But there was an answering volley, and the doctor swerved to one side, to be caught in the arms of his faithful friend.

Major Gravesend was strong; and lifting the doctor on his shoulder, he ran with him down the street, and turned the first corner. Here he stopped, breathless, and set the wounded man on his feet. Then he drew his weapons, determined to make defense, if still pursued.

Fortunately, when the confederates of The Red Hand came upon their unconscious chief, they gave over the chase and addressed themselves to his relief. Raising him from the ground, the four who were unhurt bore him back to the saloon, while their companion, who had received the doctor's bullet, limped after them, venting his suffering and rage in groans and oaths.

Finding that they were in danger of no further molestation, Major Gravesend turned to his wounded friend and said:

"Are you badly hurt?"

"I don't know," was the faint reply. "It is in my left breast and the side of my head. Take me to where I can get some water."

"Can you walk if you lean upon me?"

"I think so."

Major Gravesend put his arm around his friend's waist, while the latter passed his arm around the major's neck; and so they walked slowly to the hotel. The landlord lent his aid to carry the wounded man up stairs and put him to bed, where he lay faint with exhaustion.

"Gravesend," he called feebly, when he got his breath.

"Well," said the major, coming to the bedside.

"Don't let him escape. Get men, and offer a reward for his capture alive."

"Keep quiet, and rest assured you shall be avenged."

"It's not that. I have deeper reasons for wishing to take him. Don't let them shoot him, even if they have to let him escape. It will not better matters if he is killed."

"Very well; it shall be attended to the first thing in the morning."

"That won't do. He must be taken to-night, or he will escape. It will be easier before he recovers from the blow I gave him. Spare no pains, Gravesend; the whole object of my life turns on this point."

"Well, don't talk any more. I will get a doctor immediately, and then lose no more time."

But it was an hour before the surgeon was got; and then the major set himself to the carrying out the wishes of his friend, who would not rest until assured that active measures were on foot.

Meanwhile, "three fingers" of raw brandy had brought The Red Hand to his senses. When he had recovered his fury was only equalled by the profanity in which it found expression.

"Has he slid?" he yelled, with a torrent of blasphemy. "Where is he? Did you let him git away?"

"Cap'n, we—"

But the speaker, Nebraska Larry, was felled to the earth, by a blow which might have killed him had he not partially dodged it.

At this strange procedure the spectators uttered ejaculations of surprise. Why should The Red Hand offer such violence to one of his own companions, with no apparent provocation?

The fellow picked himself up from the floor, and stood with hanging head. He was a picture of unassuming subjection. This, too, caused a murmur of wonder. Why should one man allow another to knock him down without protest? As they asked themselves the question, more than one hand furtively sought the butt of a revolver, and looks of suspicion peered from beneath more than one shaggy brow.

As for The Red Hand, he seemed only more irritated. Had he seen the lurid light that glowed in the eyes of the man upon whom he had put so gross an indignity, he might have experienced a different emotion. As it was he merely repeated his question in an even more imperious tone.

"Did yeou let that man give yeou the slip?"

"We follered 'em until they dropped yeou, an' then they shook us in the darkness," replied Nebraska Larry, in a monotonous tone which showed that he was holding his voice under control.

"Dropped me? I reckon yeou didn't have to foller him fur, until he dropped me, seein' he dropped me right hyar," replied The Red Hand, with a scowl and oaths, misunderstanding the allusion.

"I don't mean the lick yeou got hyar; but they hauled yeou through the mud by the legs until we scart 'em off."

"Is that how I got all this mud on me?"

"It air. I reckon they proposed to bag yeou, body an' breeches."

The Red Hand swore more fiercely than ever; and wheeling toward the crowd, he demanded:

"Who is he, anyway? Does any man know?"

The men addressed looked at one another, evidently knowing nothing of the doctor, until one of their number ventured, somewhat sullenly:

"I kalkalate he ain't long in these hyar parts. Nobody never seen him before to-day."

"Wal, then, I reckon thar won't no one see him very often after to-day!" replied The Red Hand, significantly.

The crowd looked even more sullen at this. It was plain that for some reason they were beginning to regard The Red Hand with less favor than before.

Without heeding them, The Red Hand passed over to where Missouri Bill still lay untouched in the middle of the floor.

"Pardner," he said, turning to the bartender, "is thar any way we kin git a pine box made right off?"

"Thar's lumber under the house; an' hyar's hammer an' nails," was the reply.

"Take yer pay out o' that, an' let's have the fixin's right smart," said The Red Hand, tossing some money upon the bar. "Sam an' Joe, yeou knock a box together. An', Quickstep, take Dave with yeou, git a shovel an' pick some's, an' break ground in the holler. We'll give him a boss send-off, anyhow, an' git the job off our hands."

Then rough boards were brought; and while the sawing and nailing was going on, The Red Hand stood beside the lifeless form of his quondam "pardner."

"That's a blasted shame!" he said, with an oath, looking with regret at the ghastly and distorted face. "As squar a pard as any man ever had! He could throw his meat at twenty paces like a book! Wal, pard, we'll give yeou a Christian send-off, an' then we'll do his business fur the galoot what laid yeou out!"

With his foot he pushed the body so that it rolled over on its back, turning the repulsive face more fully to the light.

"A blasted shame!" he repeated; then turning to the bartender, he demanded a piece of writing paper.

Receiving it, he chewed the end of a match, so as to form a sort of brush. This he dipped into the fast coagulating blood which lay upon the floor, and traced upon the paper the words:

"I PROPOSE TO SHOOT YOU ON SIGHT!"

Then he dipped his broad palm in the blood and pressed it upon the paper, leaving the impress of a red hand.

The spectators gazed upon this proceeding with something like a superstitious chill.

"I'll go bail he's sold out to the devil!" whispered one, with a shudder.

"Ef he ain't the devil hisself!" muttered another.

Further remark was cut short by The Red Hand, who turned to Poker Tom, and said:

"Pardner, I reckon yeou'd know the cuss what done this, when yeou see him agin?"

"Bet a hoss I would, pard!" was the epigrammatic reply.

"Kin yeou find him, s'pose?"

"I allow I could scare him up some's."

"Wal, if yeou'll put that thar paper into his hand, to-night ur to-morrow morning, I'll stand yeou in beer-money fur a week."

And The Red Hand extended the blood-written document.

"Did!" cried Poker Tom, to indicate his acceptance of the mission; and he took the paper, while the man who before expressed his belief in the alliance of The Red Hand with the Evil One now nudged his neighbor and whispered:

"I allow I don't want none o' that in mine. He'll be found dead some o' these fine mornin's; an' that's what's the matter with him!"

The rude box was soon ready to receive its tenant. Missouri Bill was now dressed in the clothes he had worn, The Red Hand taking charge of his weapons. Then he was placed in the box and the cover nailed down.

"Gents," said The Red Hand, "this is a pretty nasty night to plant a Christian in; but it's the best we kin do; so bear a hand, an' we'll have the grass a-growin' over him the fust thing in the mornin'."

Enough volunteered, and the box was raised upon their shoulders and borne out into the wet, drizzling night, The Red Hand preceding it with a lantern. They found that Quickstep and Dave had already dug a shallow grave; and into this the box was lowered.

It was a strange scene. The uncertain light of the lanterns struggled through the fog and drizzling rain and fell upon the gloomy faces of those brigandish men—fell upon their uncouth dress—fell upon the arms peeping here and there from beneath their garments, where they were protected from the wet—fell upon the sodden grass—fell upon the yawning grave and its rude coffin! No priest—no mourners—no heads uncovered with respect. A moment they stood, looking silently, gloomily into the open grave, while Quickstep leaned upon his spade. Then The Red Hand spoke.

"Gents," he said, "he was a good pardner, an' always took his whisky straight. Yeou all seen him peg out; an' I allow thar won't none o' ye deny but what he died game. May none of us have a worse send-off than Missouri Bill. *Requiescat in peace!*"

The Red Hand's Latin was defective, and he "wa'n't no great shakes of a gospel slinger," but he meant that his "pard" should have a "white" burial, and he did the best he could—at least such was the impression left on the minds of the spectators. What was true, what false, in this opinion let the sequel disclose.

The dirt was then shoveled back and tramped down; and the strange burial cortege set out on their return to the saloon, little knowing what awaited them.

CHAPTER IX.

ON SIGHT.

WHEN The Stranger left the saloon his mind was in a whirl of perturbed thought. Out from the spectral gloom of the past came long-buried shadows to haunt him anew.

"Ten years ago to-night!" he muttered, with a shudder; and could one have seen his features, he would have discovered them wrung by a throe of anguish that left them as gray as the mist, where the light streamed out into it, over the red curtains that covered the lower half of the saloon windows.

The Stranger drew up his coat collar and slouched his hat closer over his eyes—not to protect himself from the weather (for he did not notice that, so much greater was the storm that raged within his breast) but with an instinctive desire to bury himself in deeper gloom. And so he plodded on through the mud and rain, not heeding whither his steps tended. But he was attempting that evasion which millions have tried, and millions will try again, the vain effort to elude the specter within by physical flight.

"At last! at last!" he muttered. "After ten years!—ten interminable years! I swore it, and I have kept my oath—that part of it. And the rest will follow—I feel it! Great Heaven, if I were to come upon him, now! God grant it! and then—then I shall have nothing further to live for—nay, but one thing!"

On through the darkness and the mud and the constantly dropping rain, unconsciously following the meager guidance of the physical eye, while the visions that flitted before the mental eye absorbed his whole attention. On, with step hastened by the fever of eagerness that seethed in his brain.

"I must be wary," he pursued, after a long silence. "He may come upon me at any moment. He and his satellite cannot be far apart. Two such fiends are too well mated to forego one another's society, except by the death of one of them. But, suppose he were dead! Ten years

of a life like his must be ten years of daily exposure to death by violence."

He dwelt gloomily upon the thought, and then broke forth again:

"No! I cannot be cheated like that. He must be alive, and I shall live to crush him! But he must be changed. I wonder if I shall know him? Missouri Bill! I did not recognize him at first. He is the same devil, robbed of the powers of dissimulation and compelled to stand forth in his true character. If the other has changed so much—but I am on my guard now, and cannot fail to recognize him."

And so he mused, until after the expiration of nearly an hour he found himself before his hotel. Once in his room, he threw himself into a chair, rested his arms on the table, and dropped his head upon them, only to resume the train of painful thought at another point.

"Who is the boy?" he mused. "There is something in his face that attracts me. I was never before so moved by a stranger. He is a noble fellow—that appears in every look and gesture. But he will go to the devil in the life he is leading now. If I could only get him away from such surroundings, I might make a man of him. But, will he heed instruction from me? My God! what an example I am setting out with!"

The Stranger set his teeth hard in bitterness of spirit, and his frame shook with emotion, as he muttered:

"Can anything good proceed from such as I—I, a murderer! Am I a murderer?" he pursued; and then with his hands clasped hard over his anguish-blanching face, he cried aloud:

"Two lives! Two lives! Great God! what a burden! But it was a fatality. I would not have harmed a hair of her head, though she crushed my heart with her perfidy."

"No, I was never guilty of willful murder! Do you believe me?—do you believe me?" he said, in a whisper.

And as he spoke he felt about in his breast for the miniature he always wore about his neck. Not finding it, he recollected that he had placed it in his coat pocket, the ribbon which held it having broken. He thrust his hand into his pocket, but it was not there. Then he began to search his other pockets in succession, at first composedly, then with increasing trepidation; but the picture was nowhere to be found.

Soon this one quest banished every other thought; and, springing to his feet in a fever of anxiety, he began turning his pockets inside out, while he paced the room, looking in places where the miniature could by no possibility have gotten. Then he stood still and thought.

He was apostrophizing this picture when he first began to look for it—this picture which had been to him a sort of talisman all his life. He had communed with it time and time again during his disordered life, as if it were endowed with life and sympathy. In all his troubles he had gone to it for comfort; he had whispered his hopes to it; he had justified his conduct to it; he had worshiped it—this simple effigy of a beautiful woman! And, like a guardian angel, its tender eyes gazing into his with yearning love, cheering hope, sympathetic, grief-sorrowing reproof, or grateful encouragement, as his mood interpreted it, had ever drawn him toward the noble and guided his footsteps around many a pitfall that beset the pathway of his checkered life. But now, it was gone; and it was as if he had lost the amulet which guarded and guided him.

"I must have lost it in the saloon," he mused. "If any one has discovered it, where is it by this time?"

In feverish haste he snatched his hat and rushed down stairs.

As he passed through the bar of the hotel, Poker Tom stepped up to him and said:

"Pardner, I reckon you're the man I'm lookin' fur. I've got a leetle dockyment hyar—"

While speaking he was fumbling in his pocket for the blood-written missive of The Red Hand.

But The Stranger interrupted him with a frown of impatience, not stopping to learn the character of his business.

"At another time, my man. I am busy now," he said, and brushing by, passed into the street.

"My man!" repeated Poker Tom, indignantly. "What in blazes does he take me fur? I allow I'm no man o' hisn! What's he in sich a blasted hurry fur, I wonder? Rocks! the galoot may be runnin' away!" he added, with sudden apprehension. "Blast him! I don't want him to skeddaddle before I gin him this hyar dockyment!"

And he dove into the street after The Stranger.

Some distance down the street, in the direction of the bar-room in which the duel had taken place, he saw a shadowy form hurry across the stream of light issuing from a saloon window, and recognizing The Stranger, plunged after him.

The shattered door bore evidence of the violent entry of the confederates of the Red Hand, and the quick eye of The Stranger did not fail to notice it. Entering the saloon, he found the bartender in the act of scraping up some ashes which he had thrown upon the pool of blood which marked the spot where Missouri Bill had

fallen. Without giving this a second glance, he turned to the corner which the doctor and major had occupied. He found the table tipped over and one leg broken—evidence of a struggle of some sort since his departure.

Without a word to the attendant, he went upon his hands and knees to feel about in the sawdust that lay on the floor, though in no place thick enough to conceal the miniature of which he was in quest. Every nook and corner was gone over again and again, before he abandoned the search. Then he rose with a look that made the bartender quake internally.

Upon his entry, that functionary had stopped his work and watched the search in silent curiosity. Now he stepped behind the bar with a quick step, dipped his hands into some water, and stood, all affability, while he dried them on a towel.

"What is the meaning of this? Have you had more trouble hyar since I left?" asked The Stranger.

"Wal, boss, yes, I reckon they gin us a pretty loud shake, take it all round," replied the bartender, with a grin.

"The gentleman who acted as my second—what has become of him?"

"Wal, ye see, he found it *raither* onhealthy in hyar, an' he slid—him an' t'other chap, an' that's a fact!"

And the speaker grinned more broadly still. "What was the trouble? Did he git into a row with some one?"

"Boss, yeou're jest a-whistlin' tenor! Ye see, The Red Hand he dropped in on us jest arter yeou'd slid. He jest gin one Injun war-whoop, lit astride o' Missouri Bill, an' wanted to know who struck Billy Patterson, hot foot, now I tell ye! Wal, while Poker Tom war a-tellin' of him about the little diffikilty yeou had with Missouri Bill, he spied the gent over in the corner; an' quicker'n greased lightnin' he gin another whoop an' reached fur him—Lord! ye'd orter see him *reach!*—with his toothpick."

"But the little cuss with the Injun blanket war livelier'n a boss eel on a red-hot gridiron, now yeou bet ye! He poked out his foot—a foot, by Judas! that wa'n't bigger'n yer three fingers!—an' The Red Hand went to grass like a thousand o' brick! Stranger, the han'somest dodge yeou ever seen, ur I'm a liar! Bu'st my bugle, but the leetle cuss air a tearer, an' no mistake! Lord bless ye! he clapped his six-shooter agin The Red Hand's temple in a way that wa'n't slow, fur rocks!"

"Hold on thar, boss!" says he, jest as chipper an' as peart as ye please; an' dog my buttons ef yeou wouldn't 'a' thought, by Cain, sir! that he stood seven feet in his socks! Fact! ur I'll swallow my head, 'thout pinnin' the years back!"

"Wal, sir, The Red Hand he war a-lookin' straight into Guinea" (the bartender didn't say Guinea, but a place of equally torrid temperature) "through the six holes of a pepper-box that didn't look healthy, no way yeou kin fix it! an' he quit ravin' around fur a spell, now yeou bet a boss! But he whistled a signal, an' a team o' five come through that thar door, *kesplit!* jest as the gents made the back door. The Red Hand follered 'em like a boss whirlwind on a big drunk; an' yer kin kick me clean out o' town, ef the gent what played second fiddle to yeou didn't drop him on the door-sill yonder an' snake 'im out by the heels, by thunder!"

"Stranger, that thar's the kind o' music they've been a-givin' of us sence yeou've been gone, an' it wa'n't slow, fur sure!"

Such was the "whisky-slinger's" account of the affray; and The Stranger, who was familiar with such scenes, as well as with the peculiarities of style prevalent among gentlemen of the bartender's education and associations, formed a pretty accurate notion of the struggle. He gathered, too, that Andy was quite enthusiastic over Dauntless Jerry's share in the affair.

"Who is this Red Hand?" he asked.

Andy shrugged his shoulders, and then glancing furtively around and leaning across the bar, said, in a confidential tone:

"Boss, I reckon thar don't nobody mostly know. Thar's them what says—mind ye, I don't say so—but thar is them what says it's mighty curious ef he ain't the king pin of a gang what's a-callin' powerful loud fur the vigilantes in these hyar parts! Thar's been a few hosses missin' jest about hyar, an' the boys is a-gittin' to allow that they'll know whar they goes to right soon, ur thar'll be war! Wal, when a man stan's off an' knocks another down—an' all fur nothin', as fur as anybody kin see—an' the galcot what gits punched gits up, a kind o' hangin' of his head, an' don't dast to say *boo*, I allow thar's somethin' about it what's kind o' peculiar! That's the way it looks to a man up a stump—eh, boss?"

"Where will I find the man who acted as my second?"

The Stranger interrupted Andy's glib tongue at the first breathing place. His anxiety about the missing miniature overshadowed the interest he might otherwise have felt in The Red Hand. Andy felt that his story had not elicited the appreciation it deserved, and his reply to The Stranger's last interrogation was, for him, unusually concise.

"That I don't know."

Then, as The Stranger turned to go, he added: "Boss, I reckon yeou won't squeal on what I've said to yer; fur this hyar Red Hand is a-goin' ter lay fur yeou, an' what I've said has been as one friend to another."

"Lay for me?" repeated The Stranger, wheeling round. "What has he got to do with me?"

"Wal, ye see, Missouri Bill was his pard. An' hyar comes the man what's got the dockyment in his breeches pocket, all straight as a string, I reckon."

The Stranger placed his hand upon the butt of his revolver, and turned toward the door. But it was Poker Tom that entered, and he looked at him with only curiosity in his eyes.

"Cap'n," said the gambler, advancing, "ef yeou ain't in such a hurry as yeou was, I reckon I've got a mite o' business with yeou what won't take up more'n a minute o' yer time."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, my man!" replied The Stranger, with a look which showed that he was not to be trifled with. "What business have you with me?"

"This hyar love-letter from The Red Hand!" said Poker Tom, sullenly, yet with due respect.

The Stranger took the missive, and, holding it at arm's length, read the ominous words. Then, with a look that cowed Poker Tom and made Andy felicitate himself on having befriended such a "boss sharp," he extended the paper to the gambler and said:

"Take it back to your master, and tell him that I shall not cheat the hangman by shooting him!"

Mechanically Poker Tom received the paper, and The Stranger turned to leave the saloon.

But the door swung open and The Red Hand leaped into the room with a yell, discharging his pistol at the same instant.

The Stranger staggered, brushed his hand across his eyes as if to clear his vision, and his weapon spoke while he was falling to the floor.

The Red Hand uttered a sharp cry and fell upon his face.

Then, followed by the crowd of roughs who had left the saloon to witness Missouri Bill's burial, The Red Hand's particular crew rushed into the room with drawn weapons.

And is The Stranger to be trampled under foot by such a horde? Hark! A cry that blanches every cheek in the room! so shrill, so full of agony, terror, rage—but who can analyze a cry when the whole heart speaks!

Through an open window, the sash of which was burst out in the mad attempt of the crowd to escape from the darkened saloon after The Red Hand had met with such signal defeat at the hands of Dauntless Jerry, shoots a dark form, with a flutter of colored drapery. A neigh of excitement and terror—a clatter of hoofs, as a fiery-eyed steed is drawn upon his haunches at the side of the prostrate Stranger—the appearance of a gayly decked female figure, standing over the body of the fallen man, and, with a cocked pistol presented in either hand, crying, in a voice whose intense passion thrills them like an electric shock:

"BACK! BACK! YOU DEVILS!" and the startled spectators realize that Gentleman Sam's sister has leaped her horse through the window, into their very midst, and ranged herself on the side of the man who, scarcely two hours before, took her brother's quarrel upon himself.

Not so much from her weapons, as in superstitious panic at the sight of the white horror of her face, her blazing eyes, her quivering form, they shrink away. Then there is the sound of rushing feet without, and a voice cries in hoarse command:

"Surround the house! Shoot down every one who attempts to escape, but take the chief alive!"

"The lights! The lights!" cries one of The Red Hand's crew; and almost instantly the lights are dashed out, the room is again wrapped in darkness, and pandemonium reigns!

CHAPTER X.

THE STRANGER UNDER A CLOUD.

WHEN The Stranger fell before The Red Hand's pistol he had just consciousness enough left to distinguish the horse and its rider as they leaped through the window and brought up at his side. With a thrill of delightful surprise, he recognized the girl who had come to his rescue once before that day.

"Thank God, she escaped!" he cried, in his heart.

Then, with an agonized thrill, he added: "But her present surroundings! What can save her now?"

With a dreamy sense of admiration he saw her stand above him so gallantly with presented pistols, defying the whole motley gang. Dreamily, and as if far away, he heard her cry:

"Back! Back! you devils!"

So frail, and yet so grandly regal! He worshipped her even then.

He had a vague perception that she cowed them all. Then everything was enveloped in darkness, and he felt that the girl bent over him and began dragging him across the floor.

Then came a shock, followed by oblivion.

Meanwhile, the wildest disorder reigned

around. There was a rush of heavy feet through the darkened room. Harsh voices were raised in quick command, in blasphemous vituperation, in cries of pain and rage, and in discordant hubbub—the last apparently only to increase the confusion. But above all sounded the frightened whinner and snorting of a horse, and the thud of his hoofs on the floor as he plunged hither and thither in bewildered panic.

In the frantic effort to escape danger from the frightened animal, and from the no less fierce human beasts, the rude furniture was overturned and broken by the fall of heavy bodies; and windows were crashed through, as affording the most available exit. Then, before the room was yet emptied, followed a rapid exchange of shots outside the saloon, as in a running fight; and finally the sound of horses' hoofs in rapid retreat.

Huddled up in a corner behind his bar, the proprietor of the Occidental Saloon felt rather "jub'ous" about lighting his twice-extinguished lamps. Thus far he had "come off with a hull hide," but a "third scrimmage might bring a turn in his luck." An occasional scene of this sort gave agreeable variety to a life which, lacking this spice, might become monotonous; but in view of the abundance of adventure, and the turbulence of its character, crowded into the short space of one evening, and recalling the proverb—"Three times and out!"—Andy voted the present occasion "a leetle too red hot fur health!"

While the shuffling of feet, imprecations, blows and cries of pain and rage showed that the human brutes had not yet all effected their escape from that darkened pandemonium, a crashing of the door and a cessation in the thud of iron hoofs told when the horse made his way into the open air. But a moment longer the blind struggle continued, and then the only sound audible in the room was Andy's own suppressed breathing.

But even the silence might be treacherous; and preferring not to "stop a bullet" "if it was all the same to the rest of the company," Andy remained content to "hold the fort," awaiting the reassurance of returning animate humanity; for he knew not how many inanimate forms, covered by the darkness, might lie on the other side his bar, the "leavin's" of the shindy through which they had just passed.

"Thar hain't no groanin'," he was saying to himself, after the expiration of perhaps a quarter of an hour, when a brisk step caused him to thrill and start with apprehension. Then from the darkness came the challenge:

"Hollo, here! Are you all dead or vamoused? Strike a light! Ho, here!"

Instantly the cowering bar-keeper was on his feet, and but for the darkness his face might have been seen broadened by a grin of delighted relief.

"Be that you, Gentleman Sam?" he cried. "Lord love ye, boy, but we've had a jamboree as is a jamboree, for sure!"

"A light! A light!" demanded Dauntless Jerry, impatiently.

But, already a lucifer burned blue in Andy's fingers; and a moment later the clear flame of the match partially illuminated the room.

Dauntless Jerry was standing just beyond the end of the bar, with his hands extended before him, as one groping in the dark. A handkerchief tied down over one eye and the side of his head seemed to indicate that he had not come off without a token of the affray in which he had so gallantly laid The Red Hand *hors de combat*. Andy caught only a glimpse of him, as with a shrp cry he leaped forward, giving the barkeeper such a start that he dropped the match, and they were again enveloped in darkness.

"The light! The light!" was the sharp command; and with trembling fingers Andy made another essay.

As the lampwick ignited Dauntless Jerry was discovered kneeling at the end of the bar, bending over a motionless form in which Andy recognized The Stranger, who lay where Gentleman Sam's sister had dragged him, beyond the rush of the maddened mob. As for the rest, one may gather the condition of things outside the bar from a subsequent description in Andy's characteristic style:

"It looked, by Jove, sir! as if a boss hurricane had set the tables an' chairs to dancin' Jubber, until thar wa'n't a piece left big enough to make a match of—blow me if there was!"

But The Stranger demanded their first attention.

"Rocks! he's plugged, sure!" commented Andy, with a feeling of awe.

Mentally he was struggling with the question:

"Air the cock o' the walk rubbed out the fust clatter after his tail feathers begun to sprout?"

But, unheeding, Dauntless Jerry was tearing away the neckcloth, then stripping the bloody shirt from the breast of the unconscious man.

"The galoot shot to kill, an' no mistake!" added the saloon-keeper, as he saw, not far below the region of the heart, a small perforation, about which the blood had already begun to coagulate.

Dauntless Jerry's face was as pale as The

Stranger's; but in it there were hard lines of pain, while the other lay as if in peaceful slumber. With eyes glowing like coals and a frame quivering from head to foot, the youth said, in a low voice, husky with intense passion:

"If he dies, I'll hunt his murderer to the grave, so help me God!"

"I reckon he'll stand a pile o' killin'" said Andy. "His kind mostly does. Ef so be yeou're agreeable, I'll put up a sawbuck that he hain't bushed yet."

It did not seem to strike Andy that Dauntless Jerry might feel any delicacy about making the life or death of his friend the subject of a wager. Had it been his own mother, instead of a stranger, the instinct to gamble might have led him to say:

"Wal, gents, has any one o' yeou an opinion what he dast to back? Air the ole woman off, ur hain't she? Come, pick yer side an' pile yer chips; fur I'm boun' to cover somethin'!"

Meanwhile, Dauntless Jerry set about dressing the wound of The Stranger with a solicitude as tender as any woman's.

Presently a head was cautiously thrust in at one of the windows. The whisky-beared eyes took a curious survey of the room, and then the head was withdrawn.

"Only one stiff, boys," said a voice in the darkness; "an' doggaun my skin ef it hain't The Stranger!"

"The blazes ye say!" replied another voice.

Then several of the patrons of the saloon, who had lately vacated it so precipitately, reentered, to be followed presently by Major Gravesend and his men.

"Is he much hurt?" asked the major, bending over the still unconscious form of The Stranger.

Dauntless Jerry looked up appealingly.

"What do you think about it?" he asked.

"It's not so bad as it might be," replied the major, after a brief examination. "He has an iron constitution, I should say, and can pull through harder rubs than this. But, of course he must be removed from here. Men, bring that door; and we will take him to his hotel."

The rear door of the saloon was hanging by one hinge; and even in that the screws were loosened. This was pulled down and The Stranger placed upon it, the major covering him with his cloak, to protect him from the drizzling rain.

"We won't go to the hotel," said Jerry, as the men left the saloon, bearing the burden on their shoulders. "I know a place where he'll get better care, and have it quieter. This way, gents, for the widow Robinson's."

They yielded to his direction, the major walking by his side.

While they had been placing The Stranger on the improvised stretcher, the eyes of Major Gravesend had studied the face of the youth with no little interest. Now he said, interrogatively:

"You have called yourself Gentleman Sam?"

"That's one o' my handles," asserted Jerry.

"But I prefer Dauntless Jerry, seein' this boss sharp has given me that."

"You have a sister!" pursued the major.

"Well, what of her?" asked Jerry, guardedly.

"She leaped her horse into the saloon in the midst of the fracas. I hope she was not hurt. You know her present whereabouts, I presume?"

"My sister in the saloon while the fight was goin' on!" exclaimed Jerry, stopping short, and gazing at his interlocutor through the darkness.

"When the lights went out she was standing over The Stranger, threatening his assailants with her pistols," replied the major, and he was conscious of blended emotions thrilling through his breast. One was solicitude, and the other—was it jealousy? At any rate, of the picture he had seen through the shattered window, he would rather remember only the queenly bearing of the heroine, while he drove from mind the fallen man over whom she had extended her protection.

"And you did not see her leave the saloon? You do not know whether she escaped unhurt?" asked Jerry, anxiously.

"No," replied the major. "Do you know where to look for her, if she is uninjured? Let me accompany you."

"I reckon she kin take care of herself," said Jerry, with a sudden change of manner. "Thank ye all the same."

And he resumed his walk.

Repulsed so pointedly, the major followed after, not a little vexed at meeting opposition in a boy scarcely out of his teens. Not that he saw a very formidable barrier in Jerry's reserve. A man used to command, he resolved to know more of Gentleman Sam's sister, in spite, if need be, of her fire-eating brother.

Half an hour after The Stranger was snugly tucked in bed, with the bullet extracted and the wound neatly dressed by a professional surgeon.

"With proper nursing, there is no reason why he should not be on his feet again in a few weeks," was the verdict which made Dauntless Jerry's face beam, while the major unconsciously frowned.

"He shall have such nursing as man never

had before!" said the former, with deep feeling. "I shall bring my own sister to help Mrs. Robinson."

Not very well content, the major saw Dauntless Jerry again go out into the storm in quest of his sister. Then, nothing else remaining to be done, he picked his way through the sodden streets to his own hotel, buried in moody thought.

Dr. Chillingworth received intelligence of The Stranger's condition with marked solicitude.

"Don't let him lack for anything which money will procure," he said. "I don't know how it is; but some link binds him to me, I'm sure. It seems as if the crisis of my life were at hand; and I want him to stand by me, as I feel that he will. If the other had only been captured! Do you think that he was killed?"

"No," replied the major, somewhat absently. "He fell; but I hardly think his followers could have carried him off on horseback, if he did not recover consciousness sufficiently to help himself."

"We must not remit our efforts to effect his capture. I have followed him for nearly twenty years, and I cannot be frustrated now."

There is little likelihood of his escaping. The opinion is gaining prevalence that he is the head of a band of horse-thieves and cutthroats. It will not be hard to raise the Vigilantes; and they don't handle such gentlemen with kid gloves!"

"But it will be fatal to my purposes, if he is hanged before I wring from him the secret with which he has spoiled my life. Promise me that you will not let them do that, if you can help it."

"I promise."

"And, major, The Stranger's picture—you will oblige me by returning it. He will be distressed when he discovers its loss. Him, also, I must see as soon as I am able."

Meanwhile, in the stable yard of the hotel a new element was entering into the drama. A crowd of men, agog with curiosity, was gathered about a horse, listening to the excited words of a man with a curry-comb and sponge.

"Thar! How's them fur yearmarks what don't wash?" he cried, exultingly, pointing to the sleek flank of the animal from which he had just removed a white spot, evidently the work of human ingenuity.

"Knowed ye, ole boy!" he added, addressing the horse, which rubbed its nose against the man in evident recognition—"knowed ye, ole boy! Wal, I reckon!"

Then turning to the crowd again:

"Gents, do ye see him a-shakin' hands with me, jest as much as to say: 'How d'ye do, old fel? I'm powerful glad to see ye.' That's the hoss of it, ye understand. Would he rub his muzzle agin yeour arm an' nibble yeour sleeve in that knowin' way? Do ye see a hoss how-d'ye-doin' Tom, Dick and Harry? Wal, ye don't!"

"I allow somebody's callin' powerful loud fur a long rope and a runnin' noose!" growled a voice in the crowd.

It was from a man who had himself lost a horse, and about him rose a murmur of sympathy from his friends, one of them volunteering, for the benefit of the uninformed, that "Joe knowed how it was himself, since his filly had turned up missin'."

"Who pretended to run this hyar critter?" demanded a voice.

"It's the sharp what calls hisself 'The Stranger,'" replied the hostler.

"Him as dropped his meat in the Occidental?"

"That's the crowd."

A hubbub of comment ensued, everybody concurring in the opinion that The Stranger had been a suspicious character from the first.

It needed but little to fan into a flame the smoldering rage of men who felt that they had been injured in the tenderest point; and soon the air rung with denunciation. A ready leader was found in Poker Tom, who was overjoyed at this opportunity to retaliate, in safety, upon the man who had cowed him with the fire of his eye and belittled his dignity with the patronizing address of "my man;" and soon an excited mob was pouring down the street toward the widow Robinson's.

In vain one more humane or less excited than the rest protested:

"But, gents, the galoot's flat on his back, plugged with a bullet that wa'n't sent home by no fool."

His voice was drowned in the wild hubbub of imprecations and denunciation; and soon the door of the chamber in which The Stranger lay yielded to the rude assault of men who "didn't stand on no doggaun fool ceremony!"

A sudden flashing of the eye and a deep-drawn breath was the only betrayal of emotion on the part of The Stranger as Poker Tom commanded:

"Fetch 'im along, fellers! Snake 'im out o' that! I reckon he won't clap hands on no more horseflesh this side o' kingdome-come!"

But a woman's voice was raised in defense of the strong man now so helpless. He who was foremost in laying violent hands on The Stranger felt on his arm the clinging fingers of a

woman. It was the widow Robinson who pleaded on behalf of her guest:

"Men! men! have you no mercy? What awful thing are you about to do? Do you not see that he is wounded, perhaps dying? He may not live until you have carried out your wicked purpose!"

But she was thrust aside, not with intentional rudeness perhaps, yet with a firmness which showed the determination of the minions of Judge Lynch.

The Stranger's iron will and tenacious vitality were evidenced by the fact that he did not lose consciousness though his clothes were huddled on with little regard for his suffering. Then he was borne from the house by a hooting, yelling mob, whose frenzy increased as it began to scent blood.

But before they reached the proposed place of trial (heaven save the mark!) and execution (there was to be no mistake about that), there was a characteristic interruption.

The ring of pistol shots was followed by the appearance of a man who rushed, hotly pursued, from a dark alley. Half way across the street, he staggered and fell upon his face in the mud, to be pounced upon by the mob at his heels.

CHAPTER XI.

TIGERS WITH THEIR TEETH DRAWN.

WITH yells of triumph the mob plucked the fallen man to his feet, not, however, until he had been disarmed; and even then half a dozen of his assailants held him in their grasp, as if apprehensive of a violent struggle. But, aware of its futility perhaps, the prisoner disdained all effort to escape, and looked about on his captors with haughty contempt, only his glowing eyes showing the rage smoldering beneath his outward calm.

Scenting new food for their appetite for violence, the crowd surrounding The Stranger rushed forward, leaving his bearers to come up more slowly.

Then, in a tone of wonder not unmingled with awe, passed from lip to lip that formidable name:

"THE RED HAND! THE RED HAND!"

A moment later The Stranger was borne forward; and the men between whom existed this Vendetta of Blood were face to face, beneath the glare of rude torches. Not till then had the muscles of The Red Hand's face betrayed any emotion; but when he saw his fellow captive his hard disdain relaxed into a smile of fiendish malignity.

As for The Stranger, he looked calmly at his late antagonist, betraying neither anger nor surprise.

There was something terribly dramatic in this wordless meeting, which impressed the spectators with awe. The men seemed like Titans holding themselves in restraint. The tragic death of Missouri Bill had given to The Stranger a prestige rivaling that inspired by the ominous name of The Red Hand. What hand was bold enough to fit the noose to the necks of these giants of destruction?

The crowd stood in mute contemplation, the courage borne of numbers oozing away before the thought of individual risk, should either of these men effect his escape, so that he could wreak his vengeance upon those who had been conspicuous as his foes. The men who held the prisoners began to think that it would be "healthy" to shift the responsibility of their position to other shoulders, a burden which the others congratulated themselves on not having assumed. All experienced a shrinking dread that the late antagonists would make common cause against their enemies; until the current of feeling was changed by a voice crying:

"Begorra, tha-ur's a pa-ur o' thim, the trussed bur-ruds!"

With a wave of relieved feeling, the mob realized that these men of terrible prowess were indeed at their mercy, and if they gave them an opportunity to retaliate, it would be their own fault. Then succeeded a feeling of exasperation at the incipient fears they had entertained.

"Fetch 'em along!" said a rude voice. "We'll truss 'em, an' take the music out of 'em at the same time!"

A yell of approval was the response, and the mob surged toward the prisoners, each one eager to "have a hand in."

One voice was raised for delay. While Poker Tom was ready and anxious to be chief in compassing the death of The Stranger, in the fall of The Red Hand he saw the loss of a hero and a possible future ally. Already he had had visions of standing next to The Red Hand, in the place of Missouri Bill; for he believed them to have been chief and lieutenant of a powerful band. Now, he said:

"Hold on hyar, gents! I reckon thar hain't nothin' agin 'The Red Hand, only that he tried to avenge his pardner. I allow yeou'd better take yer paws off o' him. This hyar's our man."

But there was one circumstance which rendered a portion at least of his auditors deaf to his reasoning. Those who held The Red Hand knew that by letting him escape now they would be signing their own death-warrants. So they

dragged the prisoner forward, drowning the voice of opposition by their shouts; and the mob, as little inclining to mercy as heedful of strict justice (since, if he did not deserve hanging on any explicit charge, it was more than likely that he did on *general principles*) was not slow to catch the infection.

In such a community it is never necessary to go far for a rope; and already two running nooses dangled side by side from the signboard of the hotel when the mob came up.

In his room in the hotel Dr. Chillingworth was in a fever of excitement, while the major stood at the window watching the approaching mob.

"You must make an effort to save him," said the doctor. "But it will be all the same; the exposure will be his death."

Major Gravesend made no reply. At reference to the possible death of The Stranger, there arose before his mind a picture of Gentleman Sam's sister, and again he frowned unconsciously.

Suddenly he started and exclaimed:

"They've got another, and—it's The Red Hand!"

Instantly he jumped to the correct conclusion. The wounded ruffian, failing to escape with his fellows, had gone into hiding, where he had been accidentally unearthed by some of the men who had formed the major's party early in the evening.

"The Red Hand?" cried Dr. Chillingworth.

And in the intensity of his excitement he rose from his bed and staggered to the window.

By an effort of will he fought back the blinding vertigo until he saw his life foe in the midst of the mob, then the supporting arm of his friend saved him from falling, and he was borne exhausted back to bed.

"Gravesend," he gasped, huskily, "whatever becomes of the other, don't let them hang him! My God! it must not be!"

"I will do what I can," replied the major.

Then calling an attendant, in whose charge he left his friend, he descended to the steps of the hotel.

It was a terrible scene that the major witnessed. Beneath the glare of the torches both prisoners were ghastly in their pallor. It was not the effect of fear; but both were faint from loss of blood and from the excruciating pain occasioned by their wounds. Only such iron wills could keep the sick body from betraying its weakness by utter prostration. Their stoical calm was terrible by contrast with the wild excitement about them.

The major thought rapidly. He reflected that he was under no particular obligation to save The Stranger, beyond the common debt he owed humanity. Then he bit his lip with chagrin that such an idea should cross his mind at such a moment! The next thought was that, once the mob had tasted blood, nothing would appease them until they had glutted their appetite with the death of both their victims. In truth to his friend, then, he must save both, in order to save either. As a sort of amends to his conscience, he espoused the cause of The Stranger first.

"Fellow citizens!" he cried, with the instinctive complaisance of a diplomat, "of what is the man who calls himself 'The Stranger' accused?"

"Bad luck to the thafe o' the wor-ruld! he has a propinsity fur appropriatin' honest min's horses, an' be hanged to 'im!" cried a voice.

"Thar's the hoss, an' hyar's the rightful owner; an' he's the galoot as rode him into town not four hours ago," added another.

"The whelp had spotted him from nose to crup; but I knowed him—you bet!—the minute I clapped eyes on him," affirmed the owner of the horse.

"Well," pursued the major, "what do you purpose to do with him?"

"Hang him!"

"String him up to the signboard!"

"Cut off his wind with one o' Judge Lynch's patent collars!"

"Make a warnin' of 'um—the spalpeen!—to all horse-thaves!"

To still the hubbub, the major raised his hand, and then addressed the mob with impressive gravity.

"Gentlemen," he said, "have you considered what you are doing? A man rides into town on a horse which proves to have been stolen, and for that you purpose to hang him. Is the evidence conclusive that he actually stole the horse? And if it were, can you proceed without the forms of law? Where is your judge? Where is your jury? Where are your sworn witnesses? Who is to appear in defense of the prisoner? If the owner of the horse were to take the law into his own hands and kill the supposed thief, it would be murder. Is it any the less murder if he be assisted by a friend, or by two, or ten, or a hundred?"

With this introduction, he harangued them until he had given time for second thought. Those who had not been particularly prominent and had least to fear were the first to "weaken"—to use their own phrase. When, in conclusion, the major proposed that both prisoners be held in confinement until the morrow, when they should be granted some sort of trial (if ever so

informal), before some sort of court (even if not a legally constituted one), they threw their influence on his side.

The execution of mob law depends first of all upon unanimity; and a division being effected, the more violent were compelled to yield to this compromise.

By this strange conjunction of circumstances, it was brought about that the two bitter foes were confined in the same room. The unused loft of a barn served as a "calaboose;" and for lack of iron gratings and stone walls the prisoners were bound securely with cords. Below in the stable, its owner, Lou Bradshaw, the town jailer, sat, on guard, in company with "an old crony," Ned Conkling, to defeat any possible attempt at escape from those within or at rescue from their friends without.

Exhausted by his sufferings, The Stranger lay with closed eyes. Yet the hard lines of pain in his pale face were softened by what seemed to be a faint smile, as if his thoughts had strayed away from rankling enmities and threatening dangers, to pleasanter visions.

And indeed his fancy had called up a picture fair to contemplate.—It was busy painting a beautiful face, lighted with pity and—might it be something more?—while its owner struggled to drag a wounded man behind a bar, out of the reach of danger. Vaguely, as if in some half-forgotten dream, he recalled a warm teardrop falling on his cheek and lips that thrilled him even in remembrance touching his in a kiss as light as air. Was there any reality in it all? Even the hope that there might be was enough to give life a new value. And was he now to lose that life, of which, till now, he had been so careless?

A harsh voice recalled him to the actualities of the present.

"Well, my chicken, I was in hopes of having another opportunity to test your bullet-proof qualities; but it looks as if our kind friends had pretty effectually drawn our teeth for the present."

"Did you get my reply to your pretty challenge?" asked The Stranger, mockingly. "It was that I would not do you the honor to cheat the hangman."

"Curse you! I have determined to cheat the hangman in your case, in order that I may do you the honor and myself the pleasure to roast you alive!"

"Ah?" sneered The Stranger, tauntingly. "Is it any part of your purpose to spit me, as I did your pretty fellow, Missouri Bill, as he called himself?"

"I'll have you cut in inch pieces for that!"

"Indeed? Shall you commence the operation immediately, or wait until your head is well out of the noose?"

"Bah! There isn't rope enough in the Territory to hang me!"

"No doubt the men who ran away will come back to rescue you."

The Stranger laughed.

A volley of oaths told The Red Hand's exasperation.

In the midst of this outburst, he paused abruptly, while his face lighted up with triumphant expectation.

"Hark!" he cried. "Do you hear that?"

A murmur of voices rose from the floor below. A man's gruff bass alternated with a woman's higher treble.

"That," cried The Red Hand, while his face became diabolical in its glee—"That means life to me, and death to you!"

CHAPTER XII.

TREACHERY.

LEFT alone to guard the prisoners, Lou Bradshaw and Ned Conkling had recourse to their pipes and a greasy pack of cards, to while the tedium of their vigil. It was not long before they became conscious of a great desideratum, lacking which all other pleasures soon palled.

As Conkling drew in the last "trick," Bradshaw said:

"You've got the rubber on me ag'in, an' still yer not happy."

"Yes, Lou," replied his companion, with mock pathos; "but I feel a goneness—hyar!"

And he placed his hand where his vest would have lapped, had he worn a double-breasted one.

Bradshaw laughed and said:

"Old hoss, a little o' the balm would build us both up, I reckon, and keep out the dampness."

"An' it's a powerful onhealthy contrast—dampness is—when a feller's dry. A drop or two might save us from takin' our death o' cold, ye know!"

And the tippler winked at his own humor.

"Suppose you go fur some, Ned," suggested the other.

"Ah, Ned, but the pris'ners? Bless their hearts, but they'd miss me!"

"Go along! I'll console 'em, if they shed any tears over your loss."

"Lou, yeou're a chum as one kin tie to, every time. I know yeou wouldn't stick at any thing to accommodate yer ole pal. But—I hate to mention it like pison, Ned!—only yeou know the story: 'talk's cheap, but it takes rocks to

fetch the whisky.' An' my banker, Ned—he's slid, I reckon, with all the funds. Leastways—"

"There! There! That'll do! Hyar's the skads—"

"A temporary loan, ye know, Ned. When I'm flush—"

"Oh, yes. Don't mention it. As you say—a temporary loan!"

And the speaker laughed.

"But—"

And he hesitated in the act of placing the money in the eagerly expectant palm of his companion.

"But?" echoed the other; and a look of pathetic disappointment came into his face.

"Ned," said Bradshaw, with laughing calculation, "yeou know yeour weakness."

"Lou," protested the other, "hain't we pards?"

"Oh, yes; we're pards fast enough."

"Well, then?"

Conkling evidently thought that settled the matter.

"But when should I see yeou back again? Not until yeou'd swilled all the lickin' yourself, I'll bet money!"

"Ned, yeou don't think I'd go back on yeou like that?"

And the injured look of the old toper made his chum shake his sides with laughter.

"Hyar. Take the money. An' ef yeou hain't back with a full bottle and an empty whisky-sink, I'll scalp ye, sure!"

"Ned," said the other, earnestly, as he received the money with a radiant smile, "ef I hain't square with yeou *this* time, my scalp's yourn!"

And he trudged off through the mist and drizzle, hugging the money which was to purchase the wherewithal to "make a man of him."

He had scarcely disappeared when Bradshaw started at a sound very close at hand, and a moment later a woman stood in the open doorway, laughing to see him grasp his weapons.

"Oh, you're a brave one," she cried, "to let a woman give you such a start."

"Is that yeou, Katie?" he asked, springing up to meet her with mingled pleasure and surprise.

"Have you forgotten me, then, that you have to ask if it's me?" she said, coquettishly.

"Never fear o' my forgettin' yeou, though I've seen little enough of yeou, of late, but in my dreams. But, what in the world brings yeou hyar this time o' night, my pretty?—all the same yeou're welcome as flowers in May!"

And his words found corroboration in an attempt at snatching a kiss.

"Lou!" admonished the woman, sharply; and her ready hand dealt his ear a ringing cuff, as a reward for his audacity.

But there was nothing of anger in the blow, and he named it not far from rightly when he exclaimed:

"Thunder an' Mars, Katie! that's a love-tap as 'ud win the heart of a grizzly!"

"I heard you'd got to watch all night, and thinking you'd be lonesome, I come to give you a bit o' my company," explained the woman.

"I wouldn't 'a' done it, if I'd known you was going to forget your manners at the very start."

"Katie, dear, don't be hard on a feller," expostulated her lover. "I hain't had a drop to wet my whistle—it's so long I've forgot the taste of it; an' bein's I was dry, yer lips looked so temptin'—"

"Don't compare my lips to your bottle. If you had less o' the bottle—"

"Or more o' the lips, Katie. There'd be no use for the bottle then, ye know."

"I'm afraid you're a sad flatterer, Lou," said the woman, her pleasure beaming in her eyes.

"But, there's many a worse one than you, the world over; and thinking you'd want something to keep the damp out—"

She drew a flask from beneath her shawl; and he sprang forward with pleased surprise.

"Ah, Katie! yeou're one of a million!" he cried.

"How ready you are for the bottle!" she said, withholding it with a show of vexation.

"Or the lips, Katie," he said. "Make it the lips, an' we'll throw the bottle out o' the window!"

At that she smiled again.

"Shall it be the lips?" he persisted, drawing near her with an insinuating smile.

The woman looked at him with eyes that sparkled saucily. With a laugh that trilled with coy delight she shrunk away from him, all the while inviting him with her eyes.

The next instant he had caught her in his arms and robbed her of that which costs nothing, yet is worth so much—to the parties immediately interested.

"Oh, go along with you!" she cried, snatching herself from his embrace and presenting him with the bottle. "Are you a bear, that you must crush me to death?"

"My hug can't fit snugger'n yeour buffet," he laughed. "But am I to have the kiss and the bottle too?"

"No, no. I give you the bottle to keep you from repeating your nonsense," she replied.

"It wouldn't taste so good if I thought yeou meant that speech," he said, applying the bottle to his lips.

A quick flash lighted the woman's eyes, as she saw the liquor pass down his throat in several following swallows; but her lips smiled all the while.

"Whew!" gasped the man, catching his breath, while the tears came into his eyes. "A man 'ud have to have a sheet-iron lining if he swigged that every day! What kind o' whisky do yeou call that?"

"That ain't whisky, Lou. That's cognac," said the woman.

"Coneyac!" he repeated. "I should say it was fire'n brimstone! What in blazes is coneyac?"

"Hear the man! Don't you know what brandy is, Lou?"

"Not that kind. I reckon that's bottled lightnin'."

"If you don't like what I bring you, you shan't have any more!"

And she snatched the bottle from his hand.

"Hold on, Katie," he began.

"Don't Katie me!" she interrupted him.

"Oh, I see," he replied, slyly. "Yeou take the bottle away from me so's I'll go back to my nonsense, as yeou call it."

"Humph!" she exclaimed, with a toss of her head.

Then bending a searching look upon him, she asked:

"What's the matter with you, Lou? You must be in your cups. You never acted so bold before."

"Not because I didn't want to!" he replied, quickly.

A sudden change came over the woman.

"Lou," she said—and going close to him she gazed earnestly into his face, with that peculiar shrug of the shoulders and setting of the head on one side, which is so enchanting a mark of shyness, and a nervous interlacing of the fingers—

"Lou, do you really care anything for me?"

"Care for yeou?" he cried, with an honest surprise which left no doubt of his sincerity. Then, drawing a deep breath, he ejaculated with a snort of earnestness:

"Wal!—yeou jest bet all yer ole bonnets I don't care fur nobody else!"

"Oh, Lou!" exclaimed the woman; and with that clasping of the hands where each grasps the other as in congratulation—not the interlaced fingers of despair or supplication—she looked up at him with a delight which showed in her dancing eyes.

"Katie," he began, taking her by the shoulders and gazing into her face as if incredulous of his good fortune; but she interrupted him.

"Sit down, Lou," she said, and pushed him toward a box in a corner of the room.

Smiling he submitted to her direction, watching her expectantly. When she placed herself beside him he would have clasped her in his arms, in the enthusiasm of his new-found happiness; but holding his hands she prevented him, and nestling close to his side she leaned her head against his shoulder, so that she could look into his eyes.

"Katie," he said, in a tone lowered by his earnestness, "is it so? Do yeou like me, an' will yeou have me some day?"

"Don't talk, Lou," said the woman; "I want to think of it all."

Again he submitted, and with a strange feeling of rest and content leaned back against the wall, only holding to her hands, as if it were tangible evidence of what seemed too good to be true.

In this position her eyes held his as if by fascination. If he noticed that everything was becoming dreamy, it was without surprise.

The woman remained motionless until his heavy eyelids closed and his head sunk to one side until it found rest in the angle of the walls. Then she called him gently.

"Lou."

He gave no indication of hearing her.

Withdrawing herself from her semi-recumbent position, she gazed at him fixedly. She shook him, calling again:

"Lou!"

His heavy breathing showed how completely his senses were wrapped in lethargy.

Now the treachery of the woman showed in the exultant gleam in her eyes.

"A clod!" she muttered, and spurned him with her foot, as a sort of revenge for her enforced fondling of a moment before.

With swift motions, whose dexterity showed that the work was not unaccustomed, she disarmed the unconscious man, taking his knife and pistols. Then, seizing his carbine and that of his late companion, Ned Conkling, she sprang up the stairway leading into the loft of the stable.

"Now for freedom to The Red Hand!" she exclaimed, with a sort of fierce exultation. "Did these dolts think to hold him, who is a king to them?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A TIGRESS.

"THAT means life to me and death to you!" had been The Red Hand's exultant exclamation; and when the woman appeared up the stairway he could hardly repress a shout of triumph.

With scarcely a glance at The Stranger, the woman hastened to The Red Hand.

"My king and master!" she cried, kneeling and bending over him, "my hand gives you back to life and liberty!"

With an almost tigerish passion she caught up his head and kissed him on the forehead and lips.

"That's enough of sentiment," he replied, harshly. "Now cut these accursed bonds!"

"They constricted my heart while they galled your flesh," she replied, slashing them asunder with the knife she had taken from Lou Bradshaw.

With a bound The Red Hand gained his feet, then shook himself, as a lion just risen from his lair.

"Free once more!" he cried. "Now let's see the hounds retake me!"

His rolling eye fell upon The Stranger, yet prostrate and helpless in his bonds.

"Ha!" cried the robber chief, "here is one debt yet unpaid! Now, my trussed bird," he continued, mockingly, "I'm ready to spit you, as you suggested!"

Snatching the knife from the woman's hand he advanced upon his prostrate foe, with eyes glowing with savage delight and white teeth gleaming through his shaggy beard like the fangs of some beast of prey.

As for The Stranger, while no fluctuation of color, no wavering glance, no quivering muscle gave indication of even a shadow of fear, he made such an effort to avert instant death—or better, slaughter—as no brave man need have blushed to make.

"You cowardly cur!" he cried, his wound forgotten in the storm of passion that moved him, "dare you so much as free one of my hands? But it would be glory enough for such a dog to slay a lion even chained!"

"Oh-ho, my bantling! how loudly you crow!" sneered The Red Hand. "I'll release, not one, but both your hands. And then let's see if you can peck in proportion to your racket."

As he spoke he reeled with vertigo induced by the loss of blood he had sustained from the wound inflicted by The Stranger's bullet in the Occidental Saloon. But a mighty effort of his will sent the blood into his brain; and he staggered forward through the refuse hay which littered the floor of the barn loft.

Meanwhile a wonderful change had come over the woman who had liberated him. When she first heard The Stranger's voice and saw his face by the light of a lantern which hung from one of the rafters, she started, dropping the pistols which she still held, with a sudden shrinking within herself, and gazed at him with staring eyes. The longer she looked the more deeply she seemed moved.

"My God! it is he!" she muttered beneath her breath.

With a sharp spasm of pain showing in her face, she pressed her hands over her heart, then carried them to her head with a sense that it was about to burst. For an instant the room spun round; the air seemed turbid and suffocating; and she began to gasp hysterically.

But as The Red Hand passed her, he unceremoniously thrust his hand beneath the folds of her shawl and drew forth a knife from its hiding place, with which he evidently was familiar.

At this the blood leaped again to her brain, awakening a vivid realization of the impending tragedy which must result from the meeting of these men. Where a moment before she had gasped for air she now stood with bated breath, shrinking back with clasped hands, as if helpless to avert the meeting she dreaded, yet watching the antagonists with eyes that could not withdraw themselves.

Whatever the past relations between him and the woman, thus far The Stranger had not noticed her particularly, and her presence in no way distracted his attention from his approaching foe. Conscious of his own extreme loss of strength, he noted every indication of weakness on the part of The Red Hand. He knew that neither could sustain a protracted struggle. He hoped that he might be able to command sufficient strength for one desperate effort.

The Red Hand reached the side of his prostrate foe, bent over him, cut his bands and thrust a knife into his hand. As he rose again he was almost overcome with vertigo, and clutched at a post for support.

But as The Stranger got upon his feet, he too was struck with a blinding dizziness which he had not felt in his recumbent position, and was fain to lean against the wall, while he passed his hand across his forehead.

Thus they stood, once giants of prowess, now almost children in their weakness, waiting for strength to begin the contest which was to be to the death.

Whether because his wound had not told upon him so much, or that the transition between stooping and standing erect was not so great as in the case of The Stranger, The Red Hand was the first to recover; and balancing himself on his legs, he cried:

"Time! Time! Get ready for the dog's death you meted out to my partner!"

"—in crime!" concluded The Stranger, quickly.

Again he brushed his hand across his brow, as

if to clear his vision. Then fixing his eye, which in that moment regained all its wonted fire, on his foe, and grasping his knife firmly, he advanced, saying:

"You were birds of a feather; and as I spitted him I'll make a brace of you!"

Already they were toe to toe, and their blades crossed with a ringing clash, when a piercing scream thrilled both to the heart; and the woman darted forward, clutching The Red Hand's arm and dragging him forcibly back.

"Stop! Stop! You shall not fight!" she cried.

"Off, you jade!" replied The Red Hand, and would have buffeted her, but that she caught his hand, her unimpaired strength more than a match for his weakness from loss of blood.

"I say you shall not fight!" repeated the woman.

"What! Dare you dictate?"

"Hullo, hyar! Lou! What in blazes is the matter with the man? Doggaoned ef he hain't gone fast asleep. Hey, hyar! Wake up, I say!"

The voice came from below stairs, causing The Red Hand to break off in his speech and listen.

For once Ned Conkling had been faithful to his mission, and, conquering (not without a struggle which might have won canonization in a better cause) his affection for "greased lightning," had borne the liquid treasure from the place where criminals are made to the place where they are confined.

Finding his chum asleep, as he supposed, on his post, he crossed the room and shook him roughly by the shoulder, saying:

"Ho, hyar! Wake up! The hull posse o' hoss-thieves is goin' to gobble us up an' run off the pris'ners!"

"Do you hear that?" cried the woman, addressing The Red Hand. "Go! You can escape that drunken lout; but in a minute he will have a swarm of men here to intercept you."

"I'll have time to pay this debt!" said The Red Hand, doggedly, trying to free himself and return to the contest with The Stranger.

"I say you shall not!" persisted the woman, pushing him toward the stairway.

"What in Cain! Is the cuss dead? An'—Hullo! What's this hyar?—a woman's bonnet! An' Lou's pistols—they're gone! An' dog my buttons ef the scallawags hain't carried off our carbines! Thar's been a stampede hyar, sure!"

This was Ned's summarization of the state of things as he found them, and the conclusion he drew therefrom. He assumed that the prisoners had fled; but he wanted help to look to the case of his old crony, if he was not indeed dead; so going to the door he put his hands to his mouth and uttered a prolonged Indian war-whoop.

"Go! Go!" cried the woman, desperately, urging The Red Hand toward the stairway. "You will find the horses beneath Hangman's Oak."

"A fit place!" muttered the robber chief, struck by the sinister sarcasm of events.

Again Ned Conkling's warwhoop rung through the night, answered this time by a shout from the direction of the saloon he had so recently quitted. Then followed a confused sound of men's voices in excited exclamation.

Seeing that there was no time for his encounter with The Stranger, even with the woman's opposition removed, The Red Hand shook his fist at his late antagonist and said:

"This is our second round, and no blood. But, remember, the next time it is to the death, if the devil and all his legions stand in the way! Three times and out!"

With that he turned and tottered down the steps.

"Forward, men!" he cried to an imaginary command, "an' we'll put a stopper on the clack o' this noisy bantam!"

As he spoke, he fired a shot at random, rightly surmising that the valiant Ned would think it "onhealthy hangin' round thar," and so take to his heels, until his courage had the support of companionship. In this way his passage was left clear to the open air.

But the woman remained, to confront The Stranger with a visage which would have done credit to a Gorgon.

He stood staring blankly at her, as he had from the first of her interference, when he had gained a clear view of her face.

"Well!" she cried, fiercely, "do you recognize me?"

"Pepita!" he said, in a dazed sort of way.

"Ah! you know me!" she cried, wolfishly.

"I—I thought that you were dead!" he stammered, again passing his hand across his brows.

"Through no fault of yours, if I am still alive!" she snapped.

"You know that I did not strike at you."

"Bah! You struck at my heart of hearts! Only to-night you stabbed my brother to the heart. But do you think you hurt me there? No! The fool deserved his death, if he was not man enough to cope with such a manikin—such a pigmy—such a—such a—"

She hesitated, at a loss for an epithet sufficiently expressive of diminutiveness by which to show her contempt for his stature. As a fact, but slightly below the medium height of

men, the contrast between him and the towering form of The Red Hand was very marked.

After a moment's hesitation the exasperated woman burst forth:

"Bah! you are not big enough for a fair-sized woman! If I were a man I would refrain from striking you for the same reason! If, then, my brother allows himself to be overcome by such a whiffet in a fair fight with knives, I have no regrets—I disown him, as unworthy. But," she pursued, with clenched fists and blazing eyes, "when you direct your bullets—that infernal invention which places all men on an equality!—when you direct your bullets against him—"

"It was in self-defense, even had he not given me just provocation," interrupted The Stranger.

The woman's manner underwent a sudden change.

"Oh, yes!" she laughed, mockingly. "We made a fine dupe of you, did we not? And why have you just assured me so earnestly that you did not strike at me? Do you love me still? Ha! Ha! Ha! Well, then, know that I hate you!—I hate you!—I HATE YOU!" she cried, raising her voice at each repetition, until it ended in a shrill scream of fury.

"See!" she continued, "I have just saved your life. For love of you? No! No! No! Words are inadequate to express my detestation—my abhorrence—my loathing of you! I save your life as I would that of a mangy cat! I toss it to you as I would toss meat to a dog! I spurn it from me! I spit upon it, as I spit upon you! You are a stench in my nostrils! You offend my sight! I would shrink from touching you as I would recoil from contact with a slimy lizard! Faugh! in your presence every sense shudders with horror and disgust! I leave you to the dog's death which is coming with yonder mob! At your last gasp reflect that I laugh!—I jeer!—I dance!—I—"

With fingers curved like claws and lips drawn back from her teeth in such a manner as to be vividly suggestive of the tigress in her nature, she had advanced until scarcely a foot separated her from The Stranger, hissing her fierce words into his face. But suddenly she broke off with a scream, and fled, with her hands over her ears, like some crazy creature.

The heart of a woman is a strange thing. Did she hate him so, or was her very intensity an indication that, after her tigerish fashion, she loved him? Who can tell?

As she disappeared down the stairway the reaction came; and The Stranger sunk almost unconscious to the floor. The confused voices of the mob, which had reached the stable-door, and the sharp crack of a pistol, followed by a groan, came to him faintly, as if from a distance. As things which stir the blood during wakefulness often call forth no corresponding emotion in a dream, so he was just sufficiently conscious to take cognizance of the sounds, but felt no thrill.

Was the woman dead?

He did not even ask himself the question.

CHAPTER XIV.

BENEATH THE HANGMAN'S OAK.

DECEIVED by The Red Hand's ruse, and having the supposed fate of his chum before his eyes, Ned Conkling beat a hasty retreat, or, to use his own expression, "cut dirt out o' that right smart, fur a fact!"

"Hullo, hyar! W'at's the row?" was the salutation of Poker Tom, as Ned showed no intention to slacken his pace until he was in the midst of friends.

"The hull kit an' caboodle o' 'em's up yon," panted the badly routed guard.

"Who?"

"What?"

"Whar?"

A score of voices questioned him, eagerly, as the men gathered 'round.

"The Red Hand an' his hull gang," replied Ned, excitedly. "They've gobbled up Lou; an' when I yelled they charged me down the stairs with a broadside, an'—well, bein's as I've got a family, I cut stick; an' hyar I be. I reckon they ambushed Lou behind a petticoat. He's laid out alongside of a woman's bonnet."

"No more chin-music! Hurray, fellers! ur they'll give us the slip," urged a voice.

"Hold on!" cried Poker Tom, who was not so "keen" after The Red Hand as became an honest citizen.

But a mob recognizes leadership only in the men who are in advance; and the gambler found himself likely to be left alone.

Pell-mell they rushed, each with his revolver held in readiness, until they came in sight of the open stable-door, from which the figure of a woman was issuing.

"Whoop! Hyar's somethin'!" yelled the foremost. "Hold on hyar, missy! We wants a lock o' yer ha'r!"

And he extended his hand to arrest her flight.

"Die, you fool!" was her fierce reply.

A pistol exploded almost in his face, and he fell without a groan.

"Stop'er! Stop'er! Stop'er!" yelled the mob, not thinking to use their weapons on a woman, until Ned Conkling cried:

"It's a galoot in women's clo's! Give 'im a pill fur Lou!"

Then their pistols spoke in a scattering volley. But a taunting laugh came back from the obscurity, where the fluttering skirts of the woman could be but dimly distinguished.

With the advantage of dress in their favor, the men found that her fleetness was fully a match for theirs; and when she reached Hangman's Oak she had rather gained on her pursuers. There she mounted a horse with an agility which went far in support of Ned Conkling's theory.

A second volley of pistol shots had no perceptible effect. The fugitive bent to her horse's withers, and urged him forward with voice and rein, using her knife for a spur. The animal bounded forward, and was soon swallowed up by the darkness.

The mob gathered in a disappointed group beneath Hangman's Oak, their discontent augmented by the discomfort of the glutinous mud under foot and the wretched, drizzling rain from above.

The chagrin of one found expression in words.

"This hyar all ccomes o' palaverin' and red tape! When all that's needed is a couple o' yards o' good hemp rope, what's the use o' jedges, an' juries, an' witnesses, and pettifoggin' whelps a-makin' out that black's white, and white's no color at all. When I knows a thing, I knows it!—an' I don't want no galoot what takes to tongue-waggin' in the place o' earnin' a' honest livin' to git down no lot o' books an' try to make me believe that it ain't so. Ef a man's ketched hoss-stealin', heng 'im higher'n Haman!—that's law an' gospel enough fur me!"

"I piles my chips on that color every time!" responded a voice. "By rights the galoots ought to be swingin' from this hyar limb, now."

"An' the doggaoned thieves has got the impudence to hitch thar hosses whar they'd ought to had thar necks hitched!" added one who evidently relished the joke.

But this discussion was fruitless, the birds having flown; and slowly the men picked their way through the mud back to the stable, to look after the luckless Lou. They found him in the same deadly lethargy, which was destined to be his last sleep.

Whether he might have been saved by the timely application of medical skill can never be known; for attention was suddenly diverted from him by a cry from the stable loft.

Led by a curiosity which found gratification in everything associated with the escaped criminal, some of the mob, in prowling about the premises, had stumbled upon The Stranger.

In a moment poor Lou was forgotten, and the stable loft was thronged, Poker Tom now the loudest of all in denunciation.

"Hurray! by all the snakes, we've got the king pin," he cried. "See! the knave was too weak to crawl off, after his friends had armed him with ribtickler an' bull-dogs. Fear a hand hyar, fellers, an' we'll hang him high enough to make up fur the one as has give us the slip."

The pistols lay far beyond his reach; but even had they been at his hand The Stranger was in too dreamy a stupor to have used them in self-defense. When the rude men approached he offered no opposition. When they jerked him unceremoniously from the floor he lapsed into total unconsciousness.

Unheeded now their gibes and jeers. No kindling eye abashed his rude assailants. The most cowardly vermin need show no respect to a dead lion.

"I say, fellers," suggested Poker Tom, with a grin, "let's give him his send-off from the back o' the last hoss he stole."

The proposition met with general applause; and soon the beast was brought. The limp form of the unconscious man was set astride and held in position by men walking on either side of the horse, while another led him by the bridle.

Thus this weird procession, its ghastly deformities disclosed by the light of lanterns and rudely-improvised torches, passed through the gloom—Nature's reprobation of the unhallowed proceeding—to the fatal tree. Witnessing the wild antics of the mob and hearing their uncouth utterances, as they gave expression to their feelings, some in rude attempts at the Rogue's March, some in mere ejaculations of drunken exultation, a stranger to the manners and language of the people might have mistaken this for some savage ritual over the remains of a departed chieftain.

The hubbub aroused the whole town, and the mob received constant augmentation, until, when it reached Hangman's Oak, it comprised all that had been present at the previous riot, and many more.

Major Gravesend having left his friend the doctor under the influence of a narcotic, stood in the outskirts of the crowd, viewing the proceedings with a gloomy frown. In his breast was waging a stubborn conflict. Humanity urged him to interfere in behalf of the unconscious man; but something which he refused to analyze and at which he frowned, biting his nether lip with impatience, when it brought before him the face of Gentleman Sam's sister, argued with insinuating plausibility:

"The mob will brook no interference now."

What can a single arm do against the blind passion of these devils incarnate? You are under no obligation to risk your own life in defense of a stranger who more than likely is guilty of the charge brought against him, and whose life, in any event, has been little good, while his death will be little loss, to society."

Whether or no this were sufficient justification of inaction, he made it answer, not however without keen compunctions of conscience and questions which he could not stifle as to his real motives.

Meanwhile The Stranger had been brought under the fatal limb and the rope adjusted to his neck, whose fine proportions were disclosed by his shirt lying open at the breast. A jarring of the boughs of the tree had sent down repeated showers of rain upon his face and breast, arousing him to a dim perception of his situation. Yet his eyes remained closed, and he gave no outward indication of life.

"Gents," said one of the men who were holding The Stranger in position, "it's bad luck to send off a galoot as hasn't the sense to know that he's been snuffed out; an' I reckon I don't want to take no leadin' hand in no such game. I don't want to smell brimstone all my life, an' have this cuss' spook pokin' round in every dark hole an' corner. I allow we'd better give 'im three fingers ur so, as'll make 'im pick up enough to know that the Old Gent's got a seat picked out fur 'im down below."

"Give him the whisky!" assented Poker Tom, not with the best grace. He was impatient of delay.

The fiery stimulant was poured between the unresisting lips. Its effect was soon apparent. The Stranger drew a deep tremulous breath, and opened his eyes.

"We've got yeou, ye thievin' whelp!" yelled the exultant gambler, shaking his fist in the face of his victim. "Now git ready fur a clean jump into as red hot a hole as they've got t'other side o' Kingdon Come!"

"Git ready, gents! No more palaver! Now let her b'ile! Whoop! an' away she goes!"

The executioners had drawn their knives to prick the horse into a sudden bound which should carry him from beneath the doomed man, leaving the latter dangling in the air. All was prepared for the fatal lunge; but their hands were stayed.

"Hold!" cried a shrill voice, which cut the air like a knife.

The incisive tone of command, enforced by the ringing report of a pistol fired in the air, thrilled every one to the heart and arrested every motion.

Then there was a wild clatter of iron-shod hoofs, the breathless rush of two horses urged to break-neck speed, the warning cries of the crowd as they surged apart to give passage to the reckless riders, a sudden reining in of the steeds upon their haunches, and, almost as if they had sprung from the clouds, Dauntless Jerry and Gentleman Sam's sister appeared beside the victim of mob law, facing his executioners with drawn pistols.

With the serape-like blanket wrapped about his shoulders, his sombrero drawn low over his eyes, and the handkerchief binding one eye and the side of his head, Dauntless Jerry looked like a young brigand, as he dashed the nearest torch from its bearer's hand.

But the dim eyes of The Stranger took no cognizance of his presence. They were fixed on the Minerva-like beauty of his sister, whose white rage awed that whole mob of rude men. His heart thrilled with admiration of the regal gesture with which she severed the rope above his head. But those who had supported him leaped aside to avoid being trampled beneath the iron hoofs of his friends' horses; the animal he bestrode plunged once or twice before he could be restrained by Jerry's ready hand; and in the effort to preserve his balance the strength of the wounded man gave way, and he again lapsed into unconsciousness.

Defly Gentleman Sam's sister urged her horse to the side of the fainting man. With such a look as might have thrilled him back into conscious life, had he seen it, she threw her arm about him and received his head upon her bosom.

It was a tragically-beautiful tableau—a picture which blanched Major Gravesend's cheek and caused him to bite his lip to the drawing of blood, as he urged his way through the crowd, to range himself beside the beautiful Amazon who thus boldly plucked meat from between the lion's paws.

CHAPTER XV.

DELIVERED ANEW.

DAUNTLESS Jerry had left the bedside of The Stranger with a mind tossed about by perturbed thought. The stirring scenes of that eventful night furnished many topics for reflection.

"How strong and brave he is!" mused the youth, thinking of the gladiatorial muscular development and unwavering eye of The Stranger. "If he dies—but, no! he shall not die!"

He quickened his horse's pace with excitement; and presently his mind turned to the

strange agitation manifested by Dr. Chillingworth.

"What did he see in me that disturbed him so?" asked Jerry of himself. "It must be a chance resemblance. He can be nothing to me. And yet, the hair might have deceived him. He shall see my sister!"

Jerry laughed lightly, as he spoke; but his face almost immediately became serious again.

"What if the whole mystery of my life were to be cleared up? I believe that Mad Kate knows, if I could only get her to tell. Poor Kate! she has been father, mother, brother, and sister to me. But if this man should know; if he should prove that I am what I have scarcely dared to hope!"

He paused, while a deep flush mounted to the roots of his hair; and when he spoke again, his voice had that peculiar tenderness so like a woman's.

"No! no! not to be made ruler over all the world! It may be a vain hope, after all; but I will avoid him until—until—"

The flush, hidden by the darkness, grew deeper and deeper on his cheek; and his voice sunk into silence; so that he concluded only in thought:

"He might be abashed, if I proved to be one of the grandees. Not that any are too good or too high for him! God heal him of that terrible wound!"

By this time he had left the town far behind, and plunging into the woods along a bridle-path, he soon came upon the secluded cabin which he called his home. An hour later, two riders emerged from the bridle-path upon the highway. In one we might have recognized, but for the darkness, Dauntless Jerry's serape-like blanket and slouched sombrero. But the other, had it been light enough to distinguish loveliness from deformity, would have chained the attention. In the young girl whose rare beauty of form and feature must have been striking in any assemblage, we would have recognized Gentleman Sam's sister.

Not from the uncertain light of the lantern suspended from the foot of her escort to enable them to pick their way through the rayless night—for it gives only vaguely the general outlines of their figures—but from our recollection of her as she appeared in the morning, we might draw a comparison giving to her cheek a most dazzling fairness, with the faintest perceptible tinge of carnation, where his was bronzed with exposure and overcast with the bluish specks indicative of a shaven beard, and, in the place of his saucy black rings, investing her with a crown of beauty in the mass of golden blonde hair which fell unrestrained to her waist. Otherwise she was as like the Jerry whose hand and eye had curbed the rage of the ruffian Red Hand as twin birth could make brother and sister.

As they rode along they seemed absorbed by preoccupied thought; and the silence between them was only occasionally broken by disconnected speech. But when they neared the town their attention was attracted by discordant sounds and an unwonted illumination of the foggy air.

"The devils are at work again!" said Gentleman Sam's sister, giving the rein to her horse.

Perhaps it was some subtle instinct which kindled her impatience as they advanced. To keep pace with her, Jerry was forced to urge his horse with spur as well as voice, long before they reached the vicinity of Hangman's Oak. When they came in sight of it, the girl exclaimed:

"See! they are about to hang some one!"

As his executioners raised The Stranger's head to administer the stimulant, the light of a torch fell upon his face, and even at that distance the girl—did some sentiment of heart quicken her perceptions?—recognized him.

"My God! It's The Stranger!" she exclaimed.

Then, with a cruelty born of desperation, she goaded her horse with the point of a knife into that fierce rush which carried her to the side of the doomed man in time to save him from an ignominious death.

What pen can do justice to her fierce beauty, as she supported the limp form of The Stranger and scathed his enemies with the fire of her eyes. It would have made his heart leap had he seen her face and interpreted aright what it expressed. But she, ignorant of her own feelings, perhaps, never dreamed that aught was betrayed which she might wish to hide.

"You cowards!" were the first words in which her withering contempt found expression. "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Poker Tom was in nowise anxious to draw the wrath of so fierce a nature upon himself. He had seen a display of Dauntless Jerry's mettle during the early evening; and rumor said that Gentleman Sam's sister was in no whit behind her brother in courage and skill with the revolver. He therefore curbed his internal rage at this frustration of his purposes, and kept safely in the background.

It was the owner of the horse who replied:

"Wal, mum, I don't know as this hyar's any o' yeour funeral; but the whelp stole my hoss, an' we're puttin' of him through fur it."

"You lie, you vagabond!" was the prompt response; and Gentleman Sam's sister thrust the muzzle of her pistol within six inches of the man's face.

This was unanswerable logic—the only kind which will "go down" with the sort of men with whom she had to deal. Gentleman Sam's sister evidently understood their mode of reasoning; but she also appreciated the fact that, after conclusions have been drawn in this way, a slight admixture of ordinary evidence may give them greater permanence in the popular mind:

"I was present when this gentleman first came into possession of this horse. I myself held the bridle of the animal for him to mount, after my pistol had unseated its former rider, who was one of The Red Hand's gang. They had ambushed him and would have murdered him, had he not escaped on this horse. If the beast was stolen, look to The Red Hand and his fellows for the thief."

Without waiting for further argument, she turned to Major Gravesend, who by this time had gained her side, and said:

"Here, sir! You look like a gentleman. Will you assist in getting a stretcher on which this gentleman can be borne to a place of shelter?"

With her glorious eyes resting upon him, something of its wonted color returned to Major Gravesend's cheek; and he replied, with marked deference:

"Madam, I am at your service."

This time it was only a rough board, taken as the first thing which came to hand. But it answered the purpose; and The Stranger was soon on his way back to the widow Robinson's.

It was with an anxious face that that estimable lady met them at the door of her humble abode; but she was soon reassured by Gentleman Sam's sister; and while her deft fingers rearranged things for the reception of her invalid guest she gave pious expression to her joy at his return.

Soon Dauntless Jerry appeared with the surgeon whom he had summoned anew; and while the man of medicine examined his patient the youth stood aloof in abstracted meditation:

"If he is now properly cared for," said the physician, at last, "he will not have received any material injury from this last exposure. Come, gentlemen, if you will now disperse and leave him in quiet, it will be all the better for him."

The men withdrew, many experiencing a sense of relief at the prospect of The Stranger's recovery—so fickle is popular sentiment.

The major, loth to leave the woman in whom he had conceived so deep an interest, recollected The Stranger's miniature, and would have made it an excuse for again bringing himself under her notice; but, bethinking him that it would serve as an introduction at another time, when she would be less preoccupied, he retained it in his possession and withdrew with the others.

Dauntless Jerry, after a brief leavetaking with his sister, mounted his horse; and The Stranger was left to quiet and the care of the women.

As for The Stranger, after his restoration to consciousness, he lapsed into the sleep of utter exhaustion. He did not know that in the absence of the widow a girlish figure knelt at his bedside, and, with her lips resting against his hand, offered up thanks to the giver of all good for his deliverance out of the hands of his enemies.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRANGER'S LOVE.

It was on the following evening, after the fall of dusk, that Dauntless Jerry again drew rein before the widow Robinson's. He coughed from time to time, and his voice was very hoarse, as from cold taken from the previous night's exposure.

"How is your patient?" he asked of the widow, who received him with her placid smile of motherly hospitality.

"He is awake and doing finely. Come in, and I will fetch a light immediately."

Dimly Dauntless Jerry could distinguish The Stranger lying on the bed in the further corner of the room. He approached, saying:

"My friend, I am glad to see you so much more pleasantly situated than when we last met. How are you feeling?"

The Stranger grasped his extended hand, not, however, with his wonted strength, as he said: "I am easy, thank you. This little brush will amount to nothing. But you have been wounded, and seem under the weather with a cold."

"It is nothing," said Jerry. "We must expect these little rubs. A bandage and cold water will remedy such slight scratches."

"I cannot forget that it was received in my defense," said The Stranger, with feeling.

"Jerry would not grudge so little in a far less worthy cause," said his sister, somewhat shyly. "I am sure that he would gladly undergo any pain or danger in your behalf."

"You are most heartily welcome, as far as I am concerned," said Jerry, speaking for himself.

But The Stranger seemed not to heed him. His eyes were fixed upon the maiden, the expression of whose face was hidden by the church darkness, yet to whose emotions he had some index in the poise of her head, outlined between his eye and the window.

"I have but just dropped in upon you in passing," added Jerry. "I must take my departure without delay. But I leave you the care of my sister, which will doubtless amply repay you for the loss of myself."

"I owe you much for your deeds of valor in my defense, and more for the procurement of so sweet a nurse," said The Stranger. "But how can I consent to tax Miss Iola with the care of a stranger?"

"My brother's friends are my friends," said the girl; "and you can show your regard for us in no way better than by commanding us and everything we have."

The Stranger felt a delicious thrill whenever she spoke. In all his experience he had never heard so musical a voice. He recognized the cadences of Dauntless Jerry's voice, only mellowed by an infinite sweetness.

"Heart and soul for our friends, as against our enemies," said Jerry. "Everything we possess is yours; and we shall be to you as a brother and sister."

But The Stranger scarcely heard him. His soul was still echoing with the music of that other voice. Longing to hear it again, he extended his hand, and said:

"Miss Iola, how can I thank you? May I have the proud distinction of classing myself among your friends?"

She placed her hand frankly in his; and he thought that he could detect a slight tremulousness in the member, as she replied:

"Will you?"

Her voice was low. Something in it thrilled him. His fingers closed firmly over hers, as he said, earnestly:

"While God gives me life!"

In sudden trepidation she withdrew her hand.

"We are making you talk too much, sir," she said. "Sa—or Jerry, you had better go, now, and we will have it quiet."

Her brother laughed.

"You see I make her call me Jerry, after my new christening," he said. "Good-by! You may not see me again for a week or two."

He pressed The Stranger's hand again, kissed his sister affectionately, and turned to go, just as Mrs. Robinson appeared with a tallow dip in her hand.

When he was gone, Iola improvised a screen with her shawl, and set the candle behind it, so that the light might not shine in the face of the sick man. Then she bathed The Stranger's face and hands in slightly camphorated water, and beat up his pillows afresh. Her skillful touch seemed to impart a new lightness to them.

"Is there anything more I can do to make you comfortable?" she asked, when she had smoothed out and neatly tucked in the counterpane.

He loved to have her near him; and as an excuse, he asked:

"May I trouble you for some water?"

"I ought to have thought of that," she said, with a smile.

She turned to the little chintz-covered stand, shaped like an hour-glass, at the head of the bed. On it stood his medicine in cups, and a tin dipper containing water. Iola took up the dipper, and left the room. The Stranger watched her as she went, admiring the easy grace of her walk. Presently she returned with a refreshing draught, just from the well.

Slipping her arm under his neck, she raised his head slightly, and held the dipper to his lips. Her touch thrilled him; and as he sipped the cooling liquid, his eyes sought hers, with a look that brought the color to her cheeks and made her supporting arm tremble.

As for The Stranger, the selfish rogue was a long time sipping a very little, never asking himself whether it made her arm ache to hold his head; and when she settled him back on the pillow and withdrew her arm, he turned his head so that the palm of her hand brushed his lips. Then he asked her to read to him, so that he could hear her voice again; and while she swayed back and forth in the widow Robinson's rocker, he watched her through half-closed eyes. He noted the graceful, undulating form outlined beneath her simple dress. Then he studied her face. It was a strange blending of the gentle and the resolute. She had a perfect little rosebud of a mouth, so sensitive and sweet that he longed to brush the dew from her lips. They contrasted vividly with the white teeth beneath, that appeared and disappeared in the act of articulation. But he felt that those lips could set in stern resolve. As for her eyes, they were an ever-varying marvel. Changing with every emotion, they now melted with tenderness and anon flashed with indignation; now dreamy in half-sad reverie, anon they sparkled with vivacious interest. But in all their phases one dominant expression prevailed—truth, constancy.

And so the real merged into the fantasy of a dream, and he thought her an angel, rivaling her harp's sweetest chords with the gliding cadences of her voice.

Thus began the long, sweet days, when her hand adjusted the curtain so that the mellow sunshine was most pleasing, and her gentle touch arranged the pillows in the easiest position. When his brow throbbed with fever, her cool palm charmed the pain away. When every nerve twitched with restlessness, her low voice wooed refreshing slumber. Under such gentle ministrations, a much less vigorous constitution than his must have rapidly repaired the damage of that unhappy bullet. And so he grew convalescent; and as he sat bolstered up among the pillows and had her waiting upon every whim, he thought that he would be content to remain, invalid forever, if only to have her always near him.

Major Gravesend was a daily visitor, ostensibly to inquire after the health of The Stranger, "for whom Dr. Chillingworth had conceived a fraternal regard." But when he had gone through with his regular inquiries after the sick man, he would sit on the bench just outside the door, under the overhanging vines, and talk to Iola about her brother, while she sat sewing in the doorway.

Again and again The Stranger's jealous eye noted the expression with which the major regarded the girl, when she was not looking at him. He was evidently studying her and—something more! As for Iola, her manner betrayed friendly interest in the courteous major—that was all.

Then The Stranger began to observe her conduct toward himself.

Several times when he had taken her hand, she flushed to the temples and hastily withdrew it, giving his pillows a touch, or some slight attention of that sort, with an evident effort to appear as if she did not notice what he had done. Gradually there came into her manner a coy constraint; and she who looked every other man squarely in the eye, avoided his glance as much as possible.

One day they had sat thus, until the major took a reluctant leave. Mrs. Robinson was busy with her washing at the back of the house, so that they were safe from disturbance for an hour. Then, as love is full of wiles, The Stranger said in a tone whose nervousness was all simulated:

"Isn't there a slight draught from that door?"

"Is there? How careless of me not to think of it!" she said, and arose instantly and closed the door.

"How long before your brother will be to see me again? Let me see, he has only been here once since he brought you."

"He is very busy, you know," she replied, bending closer over her work, and flushing painfully.

"To be sure. But come sit down here and talk to me, won't you? I'm tired to death."

He spoke with the nervous impatience of a sick man, and turned wearily on the pillow, with closed eyes and a slight frown on his brows.

She did just as he expected she would do. Putting aside her work, she stepped to the bedside and began to adjust his pillows more comfortably.

Then his deep-laid scheme transpired! No sooner had she bent over him than the rogue slipped an arm about her waist, and suddenly opened his eyes full upon hers, with a look as calm, as steady as if he had never seen a day's illness in his life.

Taken completely unawares, the girl uttered a tremulous little cry and started back, crimson to the tips of the ears. But it seemed as if her strength suddenly deserted her; and with the hand that rested upon his shoulder not offering the resistance of a child, she stood trembling and panting:

"Oh! let me go! let me go!"

He laughed, the first happy laugh she had heard from his lips. Not that there was anything particular to laugh at; but that was the way the great thrill of ecstasy that ran through his frame expressed itself. Then he breathed her name, dwelling upon its melodious vowels with a lingering tenderness that could have but one significance.

"Iola!"

Her heart leaped at the sound. Her eyes swam in a humid languor. As if fascinated, she saw only his eyes and his wooing smile. Unconsciously she yielded to the persuasive clasp of his arms, until she rested, almost fainting, on his breast, and felt the throbbing of his heart, and his warm breath on her cheek.

Their love sought no expression in words. But the woman, whose free heart had been little curbed by the conventionalities of artificial society, let her arms glide about his neck, as was most natural that she should, and clasped him closer and closer until their lips met.

Thus lip to lip they drank in the first incense of mutual love, and when they were calmer, still holding her thus, he asked:

"Iola, do you know all that you are giving me? Can you trust me?"

"Utterly," she replied, her eyes glistening like humid diamonds.

"And yet you know nothing of me—not even my name."

"What matters your name! For the rest, I know all about you."

"All about me?" he smiled. "All that lies within the space of a fortnight, while I have been on my good behavior, learning to love you."

"I didn't have to learn to love you!" she said, with a pretty, reproachful pout.

He laughed and kissed her.

"Will you be satisfied if I tell you that it has been the sweetest lesson of my life?" he asked.

"But how can you know so much of me?"

"My life has led me to be observant of all men. It has taught me that the character of a man is a sufficient guaranty for his life; but how often is his life a true index to his character? I might answer you by asking, do not you risk more in taking me on trust?"

"No, Iola. I think we are about quits in this matter. I have seen enough of you to know that you are incapable of wrong-doing; and as for incompatibility of temper, there is no reason to fear that, is there?"

"No," she laughed, with a little hug. "But what lovers would ever admit such rank heresy as that?"

"Iola," said The Stranger, more earnestly, "I shall presently ask you to be my wife; but before I do so, I shall tell you the story of my life, so that you may make your decision in full view of all the circumstances."

"I am already yours," she said, hiding her face in his breast. "What is the use of making my decision seem to depend upon anything you may tell me of yourself, when nothing you will say, will change it a hair's breadth? You may tell me what you please afterwards, and require anything, everything of me; but I want to bind myself first."

"I require nothing of you, Iola. But it is only right that my future wife should make her choice—"

"After she has scanned you from head to foot with the green goggles of suspicion, in search of some flaw, while you exercise the magnanimity of taking her without question! A man is always selfish, even in his generosity. I'll prove to you that I can be as magnanimous as you, and, seeing you force me to it, promise to be—to be—"

She hesitated in confusion, fain to hide her blushing face again; but rallying, under the spur of his laughing eyes, drew herself erect, and with the self-assertive part of her nature flashing in her eyes, went on bravely:

"I promise to be your wife even before you ask it!"

"Oh, no you don't!" he replied, laughing. "I asked you half an hour ago, and your first reply was: 'Oh, let me go! let me go!'"

He thought he had her there, and was laughing at having puzzled her for a reply. A moment she gazed into his face, her eyes sparkling with mischief; and then with cheeks like roses and head a little to one side, she asked:

"But, did I try to get away?"

At that he laughed so loudly that Mrs. Robinson left her washing to come in and share the fun.

"Are you young people going to have all the sport to yourselves?" she asked, sitting down just within the door to rest a while, as much refreshed by the sight of their cheerful faces as by the cessation from labor.

No sooner had her finger sounded upon the latch, than Iola slipped from the side of her lover, and dropping into the rocker, engaged herself with her work. She now looked up demurely from her occupation of picking out a stitch with the nicest of care, and told a comical story, which made the innocent old lady laugh until the tears started in her eyes.

As for The Stranger, this new phase of his lady love's nature tickled him mightily.

"What a sly puss you are!" he said, when Mrs. Robinson had returned, refreshed, to her work, leaving them again alone. "You have proved yourself so much the better story-teller, that I am almost ashamed to begin."

"You shall not begin now. You have had excitement enough for the present. First a good long nap; and then we will listen to your story in the early part of this evening."

She approached to rearrange his pillows, in a quiet, authoritative way peculiar to her; and he, yielding, was soon asleep, while she watched him, as she had done a hundred times before, with a worshiping tenderness in her eyes; only now proud consciousness of possession had taken the place of the shy longing that had been there before.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INTERRUPTED STORY.

WHILE The Stranger slept, Iola prepared to make her daily visit to her own home, to look after Mad Kate; she had to pass the hotel; and from his window Dr. Chillingworth chanced to see her. Entranced, he stared at her until she passed from view by the corner of the house. He had but an imperfect view of her face; but her form, her bearing, everything awakened memories that sent the blood thrilling through his veins; and trembling with excitement, he turned to his faithful friend, Major Gravesend.

"Your arm, major—quick! My God! she has just passed the hotel! I am sure it is she—"

it must be! Let us lose no time. Great Heaven! if after all these years—"

"What do you say? Who is it?" asked the major, eagerly.

"Come on! You shall see!"

They descended the stairs as rapidly as the yet feeble state of the doctor would permit, and hastened into the street. But looking either way, no woman was in sight.

And he rubbed his hand across the scar on the side of his head.

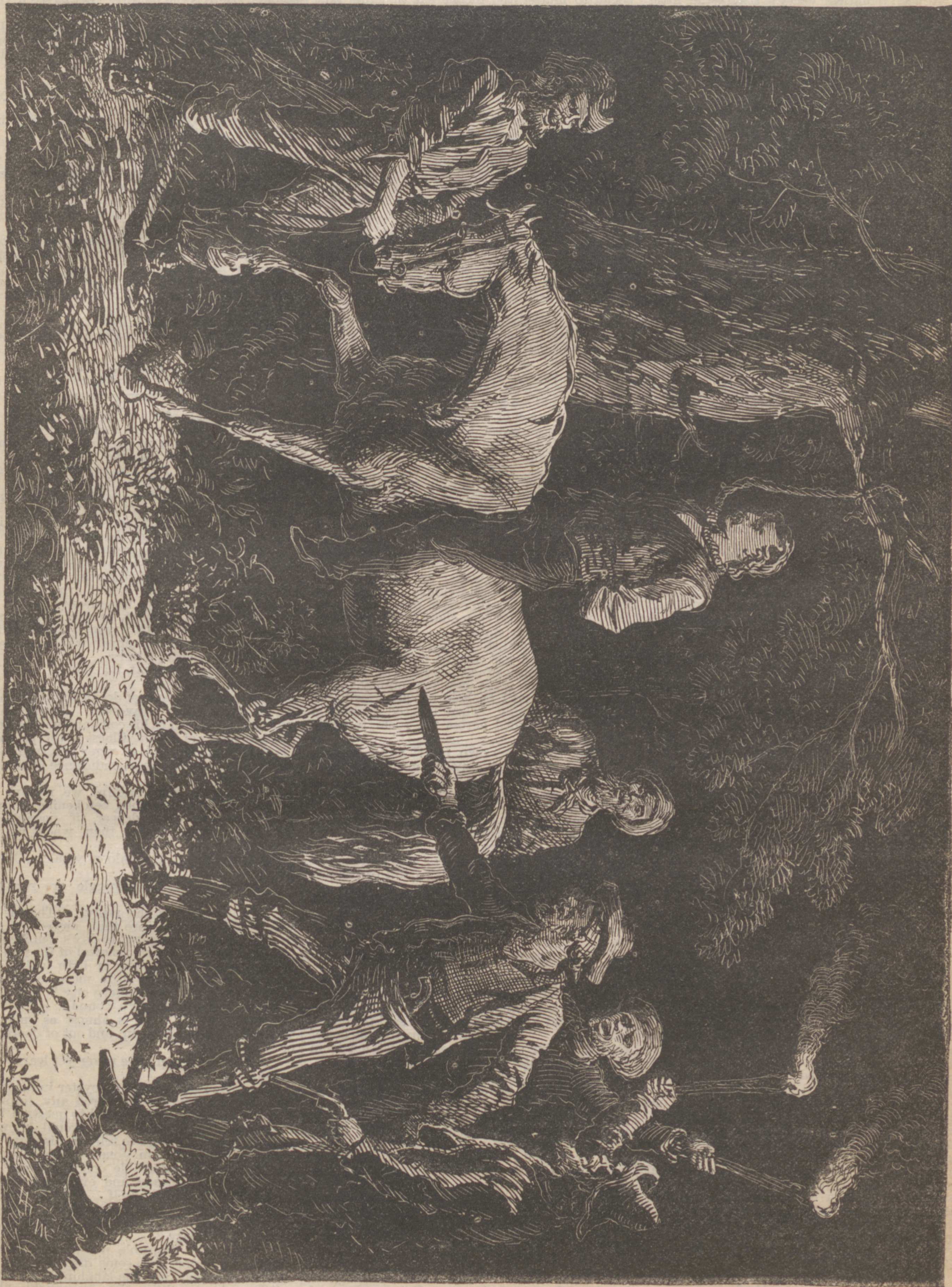
"Nonsense, Chillingworth!" replied the major. "This little brush did you no hurt. Let us inquire of the landlord. Mr. Harris, did a lady pass here, within two minutes?"

"I reckon not, sir," replied the landlord, taking his pipe from his mouth to expectorate, and letting his chair come down upon four legs.

steps of an old man, and threw himself on the bed in heart-sick despondency.

After a few vain attempts to cheer his friend, the major left him and went down stairs. From the window of the bar, he saw Iola come out of a side door of the hotel, and pass along the front, on her way down the street. Like a flash he recalled Dr. Chillingworth's interest in Dauntless Jerry; and it occurred to him that

"GIT READY, GENTS! NO MORE PALAVER! NOW LET HER B'ILE! WHOOP! AND AWAY SHE GOES!"—Page 15.



A look of chagrin took the place of eager expectancy on the doctor's face. He brushed his hand across his forehead, and turned to his friend. "Could it have been a delusion?" he asked, flushing. "I have been deceived a thousand times; but there was always some one then who bore a chance resemblance. Have I acted strangely since my wound?"

"You have been right here in the doorway, so that no one could pass without your seeing them?"

"For the last half-hour, sir."

"Let us go back," said the doctor, letting his head sink upon his breast dejectedly.

Major Gravesend gave his arm, and the doctor ascended to his room again with the tottering

Iola might have entered the hotel without being seen by the landlord, his back being in that direction.

"Hallo, Jack!" he said, to the barkeeper. "Did you see that lady pass, when she entered the hotel?"

"What—Gentleman Sam's sister?"

"Yes. How long ago did she enter?"

"Five minutes, I reckon."

"And she came from up the street?"

"She didn't come from anywhere else."

The major disappeared like a flash.

"You were not deceived!" he cried, bursting into his friend's room. "It was a woman, and she entered the hotel at the side door, instead of passing in front of it."

"What do you say?" cried the doctor, now all animation.

"It was Dauntless Jerry's sister—the little fellow, you know, who helped us out of the Occidental, that night."

The doctor's face fell.

"His sister," he repeated. "And she looks like him, I presume?"

"As much as two peas. Only her hair is light, while his is jet black."

"A chance resemblance," said the doctor, turning again to the wall.

"They are twins, I should say," replied the major, looking a little surprised.

The doctor did not explain that the chance resemblance was between Dauntless Jerry's sister and the face that haunted his life.

"You must see her, at any rate. Will you go with me to-morrow?" asked Major Gravesend.

Dr. Chillingworth was heart-sick with disappointment, and without turning his head, replied:

"Yes—anything."

Meanwhile, Iola passed on to her isolated home. She was met at the door by a woman whose face yet bore traces of early beauty.

"Oh, Io! how I have longed for you!" she cried, her eyes suffused with tears.

"What is the matter, aunty? Are you sick?" asked the girl, with sudden anxiety.

"Sick?—sick?" repeated the woman, with a sad shake of the head. "Ay, I have been sick these thirty years—sick at heart!"

"But you are looking pale!"

And the girl placed her carefully in a chair.

The woman sat a moment with closed eyes, the tears oozing slowly between the lids, while the young girl hung over her with affectionate solicitude. Suddenly she opened her eyes, and drawing the girl's head upon her bosom, said:

"Io, have you given up looking for my boy? Has that Stranger weaned your heart from me?"

A swift flush suffused the girl's cheeks, and she would have averted her face; but the woman took it between her hands, and held her so that she could gaze searchingly into her eyes. Then Iola's native independence asserted itself, and she paid her interrogator glance for glance. A moment thus, and the woman pushed her away angrily.

"I see it!" she cried. "You love him—this interloper! And this is my reward for years of love, when I might have hated you as the cause of all my wretchedness!"

"I the cause of your wretchedness?"

"Yes, ingrate—you and your mother! You are nothing to me; and yet I have given my life to you—to cast me aside at the beck of the first fool who flatters you with praises of your face!"

Passing over all the rest, that might have wounded her at another time, Iola sunk upon her knees beside the excited woman, and with hands clinging to her arm, asked:

"Aunty! Aunty! what about my mother? Did she ever injure you?"

Something in those pleading, almost reproachful eyes, or in that quivering face, sent the blood back upon Mad Kate's heart, leaving her fairly ghastly. With a shriek she leaped from the chair, and shrinking away with outstretched, repelling hands, she cried:

"Don't touch me! Oh, Heaven!"—with a shudder. Then staggering against the wall, with her face covered by her hands: "Oh God! this is my retribution!"

Still on her knees, Iola looked on in mute bewilderment. She had never seen such an outburst before. But before she could do or say anything, the mood of her companion changed, and suddenly sinking upon her knees and clasping the sorely perplexed girl in her arms, Mad Kate continued:

"Io! Io! my darling! you have been the one comfort of my desolate life. I wronged you when I accused you of ingratitude; for I know you love me far better than I deserve; and it is but natural that your young heart should acknowledge the grandest law in God's great economy, wooed by so noble a man as he who has won it. But in my selfishness I had dedicated you to the search for my boy; and it cut me to the heart to think that your life had now a new purpose."

"Aunty! mother!—for you are the only mother I ever knew—"

"For God's sake! don't call me mother!" cried the woman, wincing as if stabbed.

Iola gazed at her in tearful perplexity a moment, and then resumed the thread of her remarks.

"After all we have been to each other, do you think that I would desert you now? No; far from parting us, he will help us. Oh! if you could have but seen the look in his eyes, when he told me that he loved me! You would believe that he would do anything for my sake."

Mad Kate made no reply, but hugged the girl close to her bosom, weeping hysterically on her shoulder. Perhaps she felt that the ordinary man would bring but little enthusiasm to such a wild goose chase as that in which they were engaged.

As her excitement subsided, her strength waned, and Iola saw, what she had forgotten, that the woman was really sick. Hastily she put her on the bed; and presently Mad Kate began to mutter the incoherent thoughts that swept across her shattered mind.

With eager longing Iola caught every word that fell from her lips; but Mad Kate's secret was never more securely locked within her own breast than during her seasons of insanity. The burden of her talk was about her boy; and she took a miniature from her bosom, and kissed it, and talked to it.

It was sundown before she was quiet, so that Iola could leave her; and then she promised to return again that night, since Mad Kate now demanded her care more than did her lover.

"I must go and tell him that I am with you, or he will worry at my absence," she explained; and her cheeks were red as roses at the thought that she was now linked to another, and that henceforth the welfare of each must be the constant care of the other. How many maids or matrons, benedicts or bachelors reflect on the responsibility incurred, when one human soul is invested with the power to shape, at least in a degree, the destinies of another human soul for all eternity!

When she reached the widow Robinson's cabin, it was already dark, and the light within showed through the white curtain that covered the window. Her heart was in her mouth, while she paused a moment on the doorstep, with her thumb on the latch. Another instant and she should see him—him! Yesterday it had meant the heaven of her dreams; to-day it was a reality whose sweet blessedness settled down about her like a warm tropical wind, freighted with the aroma of a thousand incense-breathing plants!

Listening, she heard the inner door close. It was Mrs. Robinson either going from or entering the room. Scarcely owning to herself the wish that it was the former, she raised the latch and entered.

What man cannot plot to secure his own happiness? The Stranger had heard Iola's step, and sent the unsuspecting widow for some water, so that he might have all to himself the first moment of the approach of his new-found love. He was sitting in an easy-chair awaiting her return with a happy smile.

And now the girl stood with her back against the door she had just entered, and her eyes fixed inquiringly upon his face, her heart aflutter and her face aflame with coy expectancy. She never moved until he held out his arms to her with his rare smile. Then, like the swoop of a swallow, she glided across the room, to nestle in his embrace.

"Back again, my own Iola!" he whispered; "but not until I am almost famished for your presence!"

"Back again for an hour; and then must return to Aunt Kate. She is quite unwell."

"But, can't your brother, Jerry, take care of her?" asked The Stranger, with a lover's and an invalid's selfishness.

Iola flushed suddenly. For one instant her eyes fell, and then rose again, full of roguish laughter and defiance.

"A man!" she cried, with curling lips. "He'd make a pretty nurse—wouldn't he?"

Then, with her lips close to his ear she whispered:

"You innocent! I've got a secret for you; but not now!"

And at the sound of Mrs. Robinson's returning step, she slipped from him and commenced taking off her things.

"I'm glad you've come, Iola," said the excellent widow. "Now I can get my ironing out of the way. Our sick boy wouldn't let me from his side a minute, after he waked up."

And with a pleasant smile she left them.

"And now for the story," said The Stranger. "To begin with, the name by which you have thus far known me—'The Stranger'—is as likely to be my true name as any I ever had, within my recollection. My infancy and early childhood were spent in the care of an Irish woman, who always treated me with kindness, after her way of looking at things. That is to say, while she was by no means slow to wrath, she was never really cruel. But her husband was a brute, and she could not protect me from his drunken fury. These people called me Patsy. They never pretended to confer upon me their surname, which was Burke, nor did they make any secret of the fact that I was in no way related to them, and the name Patsy was one of their own selecting."

"Who my real parents were, they knew no more than did I. While I was yet a baby, a strange woman had been found by Tom Burke in a snow-drift, and brought into his shanty. She lived long enough to tell Mrs. Burke that she was from the South, and to charge her to preserve the miniature which hung round the neck of the baby she carried in her arms."

When Mrs. Burke asked the woman if I was her child, she tried to answer, but death cut her off.

"Mrs. Burke inferred that the woman was not my mother, since she was very ordinary appearing, while some of my clothes gave evidence of wealth. Moreover, she bore no resemblance whatever to the miniature."

"I have sometimes fancied that I could trace a resemblance between myself and the miniature, which would seem to confirm Mrs. Burke's theory. Here is the picture. Let us see if your sharp eyes can detect a likeness."

He handed Iola the miniature which had so deeply affected Dr. Chillingworth. No sooner had Iola caught sight of the gold setting, than she snatched it from his hand with a cry of surprise.

"Is this the picture—of your mother, do you say?"

"I have always hoped so, but why are you so excited?"

"Oh! is it possible? Can it be?" cries the girl, not heeding his question, but gazing upon the miniature with devouring intensity, then reading every line of his face. "Oh! it must be true! It is true! Oh, my darling! I will give you a name, and the true one! Horace! Horace! Dear, dear Horace!"

And with a joyous ripple of laughter and love, she cast herself upon his breast and clasped him about the neck.

"Iola, what in the world—" he began, in bewilderment; but at that instant there was a knock at the door.

Blushing, yet radiant, Iola flew to open it. Dr. Chillingworth and Major Gravesend stood on the threshold.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER TWENTY YEARS.

THE thin sickle of the moon had followed the sun beneath the western horizon, leaving the stars twinkling on a purple background which gradually deepened into the deepest blue. As yet the young city had not arrived at the gas-light stage of development, nor was the benighted wayfarer lighted by the old-fashioned sconce. The darkness of the street was only partially dispelled here and there by the light which struggled through the dusty, fly-specked window of some corner grocery, or the equally dingy, half-curtained window of some saloon.

From the dimly-lighted portal of the principal hotel two men issue, arm in arm, and begin to pick their way down the gloomy street. As they pause for a moment, in the light from a window, the lower half of which is screened by a red curtain, while the upper half bears the inscription, in fanciful letters:

OCCIDENTAL SALOON,

we may observe them.

In the younger man, of decided military port, we recognize Major Gravesend. He affords the support of his arm to his companion, who bears marked traces of recent illness in the pallor of his face and in the lack of vigor in a frame evidently competent to great endurance when in a state of health.

But, what is more painful, we remark the settled look of melancholy, betokening a great life-sorrow, which is deeper, if possible, on Dr. Chillingworth's face than when we last saw him.

Glancing in at the saloon window, he remarks:

"All traces of the struggle are repaired, Gravesend."

"Yes, doctor," is the reply. "That is the way of the world. More than anywhere else, in this Western country to-day's butchery is followed by to-morrow's renewal of the revelry. A duel here, by which one or both of the parties are killed, causes little more excitement than a dog-fight in an Eastern city."

"How is The Stranger's wound?"

"Healed nicely. He is almost as smart as yourself. He has been up and out of doors two or three times."

"And, major, you have never yet learned his name?"

"No. He is as close as an oyster in that matter. He has never volunteered any information; and no one has presumed to question him. But, what's in a name? You would know no more of him if he were to tell you his name was John Smith or William Jones. They recognize that fact in this delectable country, where nobody flaunts his lineage, and every one chooses a 'handle' to suit himself. As Dr. Chillingworth, you pass almost unnoticed; but call yourself Mississippi Matt, and you would soon be a local celebrity."

"Not a very desirable notoriety, I fancy," replied the doctor, with some disgust.

"Tastes differ!" was the laughing response.

"There is something very remarkable about this man," pursued Dr. Chillingworth, reflectively. "I cannot help being prepossessed in his favor; and yet there are expressions of his face that make me shrink from him with something like loathing—I don't know whether it is disgust or hatred."

"His frown isn't the mildest spectacle in the world, I grant you," replied the major, with a shrug.

Dr. Chillingworth walked on in silence. A gloomy frown contracted his brows. He was busy with the past.

Presently he spoke again.

"And this girl—you call her—"

"Iola."

"And the surname?"

"She seems troubled with nothing so non-essential to Western happiness. You saw how readily her brother shifted his name from Gentleman Sam to Dauntless Jerry. An exploit, or a mere whim, is sufficient to give a man a new designation, where the inheritance of property calls for little tracing of genealogical trees.

Again was the doctor silent, and a more painful stoop came into his shoulders. But as they advanced he seemed to revive. A nervous eagerness quickened his step; and unconsciously he abandoned the support of his companion's arm, walking erect with new vigor.

"The strangest feeling has come over me!" said he, musingly. "It seems as if some crisis were impending. Oh! if after all these years of waiting I should triumph at last! Gravesend, I have never made a confidant of you. It is not that I lack evidences of your friendship; but I have practiced reserve so long, that I have learned to shrink from a recital of the events that have clouded my whole life. But whether anything come of our present visit, or not, you shall know all to-morrow."

"Consult your own feelings, doctor," replied his friend. "Whenever you have anything to impart, you know that I will receive it as your best friend. Meanwhile, here is the house."

"I am all of a tremble, now that a few moments will decide everything. I have been disappointed so often!"

The major knocked. A shadow flitted across the window curtain. The next instant Iola stood framed in the doorway, with the light falling full upon her. She stood inclining slightly forward, her figure poised with her own peculiar grace, her cheeks tinged with a faint blush, at recollection of the position from which the knock had startled her. Her eyes were peering curiously into the darkness, and her lips parted by a welcoming smile.

The major started, and said to his heart that he had never seen her looking half as lovely. But there was another more deeply affected than he. Dr. Chillingworth brushed by him, exclaiming:

"Great God! it is she! Thank Heaven! my daughter, after all these years!"

He sprang across the threshold, and would have clasped her in his arms. But, with the agility of a startled fawn she leaped backward, and to his amazement and dismay brought a pistol to bear full in his face. She uttered no cry, as might have been expected from one of her sex; but her cheek had grown suddenly pale. The tender light of her eye, too, had given place to the flash of command. All the pliancy had gone out of her carriage; and she stood like an amazon, every muscle tense, every sense on the alert.

Starting forward, and extending his hand toward a table on which lay a pistol, The Stranger demanded, sternly:

"What is the meaning of this?"

But the next moment he caught sight of the major; and his frown relaxed into a smile of welcome. At the same instant Iola's arm dropped to her side, and the pistol disappeared in the folds of her dress.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said to the doctor. "But in this country we have to be prepared for all sorts of visitors; and your sudden entrance startled me. Major Gravesend, you are welcome. Pray be seated, gentlemen."

The major presented his friend to Iola—a courtesy she acknowledged with rare grace.

As for the doctor, so absorbed was he that he scarcely knew that he was being introduced to the girl; but, taking her hand mechanically, he said:

"I beg your pardon, my child, for my precipitancy. You will accord it freely when you know the cause. But—do not think it an idle question—who are you?"

In his eagerness, he gazed earnestly, almost pleadingly into her eyes.

Without apparent reason Iola flushed to the temples, as she replied:

"I am Dauntless Jerry's or, as most people say, Gentleman Sam's sister."

Dr. Chillingworth's eyes grew humid, and his face took on a look of despondency, as he gazed yet more earnestly in her face.

"Can I be deceived? So like! so like!" murmured his tremulous lips.

A sudden trepidation seized Iola. Snatching the candle from the table, she held it close before her face, her eyes flashing with an excitement that brought the color back into her cheeks.

"Look! Look!" she cried. "Am I like any one you ever knew?—years ago—say eighteen or twenty of them?"

"And you say he is your brother—your own brother?" cried the doctor, trembling in every nerve with eagerness, so that he could hardly stand erect.

"No! no!" cried the girl, with thrilling energy. "I have no brother! I never had one so far as I know! But, what of it? Do you know me? For Heaven's sake! who am I? Oh! if you can tell me that! if you can tell me that! Speak! Who am I?"

"My daughter! My daughter!" again cried the doctor, clasping her to his heart; and with streaming eyes raised to Heaven added: "Great God, I thank thee! After all these years! after all these years! Oh! Maud! Maud! look down upon her and bless her! she is all even thy heart could ask! My child! my child! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Close to his heart he pressed her, raining tears and kisses upon lips, cheek, brow and hair, his voice broken into cadences of melting tenderness. And she—who shall say what subtle instinct quickened her heart with love?—clung to him, and, with a strange feeling of terror mingling with a dizzy sense of joy and longing, breathed the word:

"FATHER!"

The amazement of The Stranger and Major Gravesend can better be imagined than described. The latter had caught the candle out of Iola's hands, just as she was clasped in the arms of him who called her his daughter; and he now stood gazing at them in mute wonder. He was in a measure prepared for the announcement of relationship between the father and daughter, for he had reflected on the strange manner in which his friend had been affected by Iola's appearance, and on words which he had dropped touching the great sorrow of his life. But, that the girl should deny her twin brother—for such he believed Jerry to be—was to him inexplicable.

As for The Stranger, he sat as perplexed and as mute as was the major. But his wonder at the repudiation of her brother was merged in another and deeper feeling.

He saw his betrothed wife, who ten minutes before was a poor and friendless girl, now the acknowledged daughter of a man whose social rank, as manifested in look and bearing, was unmistakable. Would she cast him aside, as she had her brother? He felt a sharp pain in his heart, keener than any the bullet had occasioned, and the color faded from his compressed lips, when he saw Dr. Chillingworth straighten up, and, with his arm still about the weeping Iola, say:

"Friends, I claim your sympathy and congratulation; for I have this night found my daughter, who has been lost to me for nearly twenty years—"

"To all of which I bear testimony!"

All turned, and in the speaker discovered, with a thrill, a masked man, standing just within the threshold, with a pistol in either hand, aimed, one at The Stranger, the other at Iola. At his back two other men, also masked, covered the major and Dr. Chillingworth respectively.

With ready presence of mind, Major Gravesend dashed the candle to the floor and put his foot on it. But at the same instant the window was forced in; the light of a bull's-eye flooded the room more brilliantly than the candle had done; and the muzzles of three revolvers flanking the lens of the lantern, showed that two more ruffians were ready to support their chief.

"Steady there, you little spitfire!" cried he who was evidently the principal of the ruffians to Iola. "You can never draw that pistol alive! The moment your hand disappears among the folds of your dress, that instant you die!"

Pale to the lips, Iola gazed at the man, her hand arrested in its errand after her trusty weapon. She could see his dark eyes glitter through the holes in his mask, and she had heard his hard tones, which showed that he would not hesitate to carry out his threat.

She heard The Stranger cry:

"Offer no resistance, friends! They've got us for this time!"

She knew that this was the wisest advice that could be given, taught by her own experience.

Then she heard again the voice of the chief:

"Men, shoot any one who raises a finger!"

Hard upon the heels of his last word the room rung with the blended reports of two pistols; the glare of the bull's-eye was turned full upon her face, completely dazzling her; and before she had time for thought, she felt herself snatched from her father's side, and her arms drawn behind her and held firmly in the grasp of the powerful chief. With trained dexterity his hand next sought and found the pistol she carried. Taking advantage of the moment while one hand was thus engaged in dispossessing her of her weapon, she wrenched herself free, striking him in the face and tearing away his mask.

At this he only laughed; and the next instant his arms closed about her again like steel bands, and she felt herself lifted from the floor. Struggle as she might, she was powerless.

The chief now turned his dark and bearded visage toward Dr. Chillingworth, who stood like one struck dumb.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed. "You know me? See! she is ripe, now, for my revenge!"

And he kissed the helpless girl on the cheek.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed again, and bounded through the door, bearing her shrieking out into the night.

One of the ruffians had stooped and picked up the pistols his chief had fired into the air and then thrown upon the floor, in order to take Iola unawares, and leaped through the doorway just before his principal. At the same instant the other pistols disappeared from the window, though the bull's-eye remained.

One breathless instant of inactivity, and then Dr. Chillingworth leaped through the doorway in pursuit, crying:

"After them! My God! the destroyer of my life has robbed me of my child again!"

But as he passed the doorway he was knocked senseless by the butt of a revolver; and before the major could issue from the house, there was a sound of horses' hoofs in rapid retreat, blended with the muffled cries of the captive woman.

"Great God!" cried the major. "She is in the power of THE RED HAND!—my friend's life—his, and the greatest fiend on the border! After twenty years, he has found her only to lose her again! What power can save her now!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RED HAND AND MAD KATE.

IOLA's screams were but the momentary triumph of womanly weakness. With her favorite weapon for a protector, she feared no man; but once disarmed, and in the grasp of a burly ruffian with whom her greatest strength was but infantile weakness, her terror, for the moment, was proportionately great. But, after that first terrible consciousness of utter helplessness, her self-possession returned again, and with it her native cunning. She ceased her screams and affected the deepest despondency, the while her wits were on the alert, ready to improve any advantage chance threw in her way.

But her captor was equally wary; and when they had ridden far enough to be beyond the danger of immediate pursuit, he stopped and tied her hands securely behind her back.

Iola was surprised to see her captors turn into the path leading to her hut. A light shone through the white curtain which fell before the window, partially illuminating the space before the door. The Red Hand stopped a little way back in the shadow with Iola, while one of his men dismounted and knocked on the door. Eliciting no response, he lifted the latch and pushed open the door.

"Hallo, good folks!" he shouted.

Still no reply.

"Nobody at home, I reckon," he said to his chief.

"Go in and look round," was the laconic command.

The man entered, passed into the inner room, and discovered Mad Kate sitting up in bed, the picture of wild terror.

"With a startled oath he leaped back through the door; and then, seeing that it was only a woman, he laughed at his fright."

"Hyar's a woman in hyar, what's left hand cousin to the devil or the witch of Linder, I reckon; an' that's the hull community," he reported.

"Blow out the light," commanded The Red Hand; and to the others—"Men, surround the house, and lay out any one that you catch skulking about."

The cabin was shrouded in darkness, in pursuance of his command; and, dismounting, the robber chieftain bore his helpless captive into the house with him, and kicked the door to, when he had entered.

"A light!" he commanded.

A light was instantly struck.

Placing Iola in a chair, he kicked open the door to the inner apartment. Mad Kate sat clutching the bed-clothes, with the fires of insanity burning in her wild eyes.

"Woman, come out of there!" commanded The Red Hand, frowning darkly.

Iola was thrilled at sight of the effect on the poor lunatic. Her eyes became wilder, her teeth chattered with terror, and she seemed to shrink within herself. Extending her hands, with the fingers wide apart, as if to ward off some terrible danger, she aspirated hoarsely:

"Horace! Horace! Horace!"

"Come out of there, I say!" repeated the robber chief, with a fierce oath, and stamping his foot authoritatively.

The lunatic began to cringe and grovel, whining piteously:

"Don't, Horace! don't! I never told! I never told! Not a word!—not a word, Horace!"

The Red Hand took a step across the threshold, as if to drag her from the bed. With a shriek, the maniac cowered against the wall, huddling the bed-clothes about her.

"Oh! don't! don't! I will obey you. But I never told, Horace!—not a word! not a word! I remembered the oath! Do you think I would dare to break it? No, no! I never told!"

"Come out here, instantly!"

He pulled the door to and began to pace the room; and Iola could hear the woman, who had stood to her in a mother's place since she could remember, hurrying on her clothes.

While they were waiting, Iola's mind was

busy with the strange events which had been crowded into the past half-hour. She had been claimed as a daughter by the finest looking man she had ever seen, only to be snatched from his arms by this dark-browed ruffian. At what former connection with her father did he hint when he said:

"Now she is ripe for my revenge!"

She remembered, too, that she had called to her lover's lips a fierce ejaculation of hatred by a casual mention of the name of The Red Hand. And now, he was commanding Mad Kate, and she was acknowledging him her master. What had she not told, from which she was inhibited by an oath? Iola's heart leaped at recollection of Mad Kate's strange hatred of her mother. The one thing she had refused to tell her was of that mother. Was this the secret between her and the robber chief? Iola was quick to arrive at the conclusion that The Red Hand, in conjunction with Mad Kate, or at least with her knowledge, had stolen her, when a child, from her parents; but what had The Stranger to do with it? He must have been a mere lad at that time. And now her mind recurred to the interrupted story of her lover. What was he about to tell her? Had it any connection with her early abduction? But it was useless to multiply questions where all was dark. She gave up the puzzle, to await the revelation of time; for the door of the inner room opened, and Mad Kate sunk upon her knees on the threshold.

"Get up!" commanded The Red Hand, impatiently. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

Still fearful the woman complied, and stood before him trembling, like a culprit awaiting sentence.

"Is this the child?" demanded The Red Hand, pointing to Iola.

"Yes! yes!" replied Kate, with nervous precipitancy.

"H'm! It is needless to ask you; her face could never be mistaken—a glorious face, more rarely beautiful than was even her mother's!"

He cast upon Iola a gloating look, that caused her to shudder in spite of herself; for she would not betray any emotion before him, if she could help it.

"Where did you pick her up?" asked The Red Hand, as a matter of curiosity.

"I saw her and knew her when her father was deceived," replied Mad Kate. "I searched them out afterwards, and persuaded them to receive me among them. I made no effort to effect a restoration to her parent—her mother died within an hour after you last saw her. I say, I remembered my oath, and took no step to defeat your ends. But I could not leave her to grow up in such vile company. When I had gained strength, which came of our out-door life, and while she was yet an infant, I ran away with her, and have never seen them since."

"That was defeating my aims, in part," replied The Red Hand; "but I forgive you freely—for you have made my revenge all the sweeter now! Before gods and men! she is a glorious woman! Ha! ha! how would my haughty lady feel, to know that I possess her daughter, more beautiful—ye gods! a thousand fold!—than she, even at her best! Revenge! Revenge! Ha! ha! Revenge!"

Stepping before Iola, he took her by either shoulder, and bent to kiss her on the lips. A moment she struggled frantically, shuddering with loathing, her involuntary scream drowned by his brutal laugh. Bound as she was, she found herself helpless in his grasp; and with his breath, foul with the fumes of alcohol, on her cheek, she was driven to desperation. With a quick snap she caught his nether lip between her teeth and bit with all her might.

Howling with pain and rage, The Red Hand clutched her throat so fiercely that she involuntarily relaxed her hold upon his lip, gasping for breath. Instantly he released her.

"You devil's fury!" he cried, "I mustn't mar your beauty, though I fear you have made inroads upon mine. But I'll tame you—never fear!"

The girl could make no reply. She sat with tears, not of weeping, but of strangulation, in her eyes, swallowing repeatedly to ease the pain in her throat, where his iron grip seemed almost to have crushed the trachea. In a moment her delicate flesh showed the marks of his fingers, in purple bands.

"What have you been doing all these years?" resumed The Red Hand, addressing Mad Kate, while stanching the blood that flowed from his wounded lip.

The lunatic seemed overcome by new trepidation.

"We have lived," she said, evasively, glancing nervously from side to side. "I have sought to repair in a measure the wrong I did her, by fitting her for something higher than the life of ignorance and degradation into which she must otherwise have fallen. I did not think it interfering with you—"

"But yourself," interrupted The Red Hand—"why do I find you so far beyond the bound of civilization?"

The woman began to cringe and weep afresh, hesitating to reply.

"What is the matter with you?" demanded

The Red Hand, impatiently. "Come! out with it!"

"Do not be angry with me!" whimpered the imbecile, piteously. "I thought that we might find the boy. Oh! I have had such dreams of him! He has come to me, not a child any longer, but a man, noble and strong. And I have thought—I have thought—"

She stopped in confusion and terror, glancing apprehensively at Iola.

"What have you thought?" demanded The Red Hand, puzzled at her display of emotion.

"Forgive me!" whined Mad Kate; "but I have learned to love her so! I have dared to hope that they might love each other, if we could only find him, and make my old age happy after all. It is for him that I have educated her, and trained her to purity in thought and deed, that she might be in every way worthy of him."

The rich color mounted to Iola's cheek as she listened, and she was about to cry out impulsively that she had found him; but the Red Hand burst into a brutal laugh, exclaiming:

"A truly excellent motive! But, as in the old time, where you have sown I shall reap; so your wild-goose chase will be productive of some good—it has prepared me a most admirable wife!"

Mad Kate uttered a startling scream, and casting herself upon her knees beside Iola, clasped the girl in her arms, as if to protect her from the robber chief, while she cried:

"Your wife? Never! Oh! you will not degrade her so! She is as pure as an angel! Oh! you have not the heart for such infamy! A just God would not sit by and see so spotless a one so polluted!"

"Pish!" sneered the robber. "My experience goes to show that the God you talk about doesn't interfere much in mundane affairs. He did not stand between me and her mother; no more will he step between me and the daughter."

"Oh! Oh! Oh! God protect thee, my poor child, as he will never forgive me!" cried Mad Kate, rocking back and forth with the girl in her arms and covering her hair with kisses.

Iola was deeply touched by these marks of affection; and giving her old friend kiss for kiss, she whispered:

"Do not grieve; He will protect me."

"Talking of boys," interposed The Red Hand, "who is this flippant hop-o'-my-thumb whom the girl calls brother! Of course he can be no relation to her, though they say he is her very picture."

"Not a word, aunt Kate, as you love me!" cried Iola, vehemently.

Then turning to The Red Hand, she continued:

"You vile wretch! he is one who will yet fit the noose to your worthless neck! If you dare to touch me, do you think that earth has secret places to hide you from his vengeance? I promise you, you shall be flayed alive for the insult already put upon me!"

"Whew!" laughed The Red Hand. "He's a terrible fellow, isn't he? But, as they say, one might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. If I am to lose my skin anyway, I think he can't invent a much severer punishment; so I guess I'll go on and enjoy my possession of you, until the fall of his awful vengeance! But, Mistress Kate, you haven't yet answered my question; and of course you know that I expect an answer. I wasn't easily put off when we were young, you remember: and the habit has grown with age."

His eyes flashed ominously, showing what lay beneath his careless tones.

Mad Kate bowed her head into Iola's lap and remained silent. A purple flush mounted to the temples of The Red Hand. He reached forth his powerful hand, and clutching the shrinking woman by the shoulder, tore her away, dragging Iola from the chair before her clasp was broken. With sheer strength of arm he lifted her upon her feet, and holding her so, cried:

"Do you mean to answer me?"

The woman raised her face to his piteously; her lips moved, producing no sound; then her head sunk upon her breast.

"Tell him! Tell him!" cried Iola, unable to see Mad Kate suffer on her account; but the woman had fainted.

With an oath The Red Hand dashed her to the floor.

"Fetch her along!" he cried to one of his myrmidons, who had stood a silent spectator of the scene; and catching up Iola in his arms, he blew out the light and strode out of the hut.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LIVING TOMB.

"MOUNT and away!" commanded The Red Hand; and all swung into the saddle and dashed down the bridge-path to the highway.

Rapidly they rode while the way was smooth, but more slowly when it became rocky and obstructed. Iola was familiar enough with the country to know that they were in the bluff region which borders the Missouri River, in such marked contrast with the rolling prairie land of the interior. Looking at the stars she judged that it was near midnight when they

halted in a sequestered "pocket" or valley, before a few rude cabins hidden away among the trees. Here the women were separated, The Red Hand ordering Mad Kate to be taken into one hut, while he set Iola upon her feet and bade her follow him into an adjoining one.

With no little trepidation Iola complied, and found herself in a low-ceiled room, with a rough pine slab supported against the wall for a table, and rude benches supplying the place of chairs. The Red Hand kicked open a door leading into an inner apartment, whose blanket-covered bunk proclaimed its use.

"Here are our quarters," he said. "Not the most elegant in the world, but such as answer our purpose. You may consider yourself mistress or prisoner, whichever you prefer. If you think you can escape, you are at liberty to try."

As he spoke, he released her hands from the ligature which had bound them. Then with a bow of mock civility, he left the hut.

The first use Iola made of her liberty was to search both rooms for some weapon of defense. When she had collected everything that could possibly be put to such a use, she found herself in possession of a wooden poker, an ordinary case knife, an unloaded rifle, a tin wash-basin, a pair of top-boots, a bullet mold, a melting ladle, and a chunk of lead as large as a hen's egg. Abandoning all the others as useless, she put the last in her pocket. If she could stun him by a blow, she might get an effective weapon from his belt, and then be mistress of the situation. Knowing that she was under surveillance, she did not avail herself of The Red Hand's permission to attempt escape.

She had been alone scarcely ten minutes, when The Red Hand reappeared.

"I am sorry to disturb you," he said; "but I have changed my plans. You will pardon my seeming incivility, if I request you to again submit to having your hands bound."

He approached her for the purpose of putting his words into effect; but hastily drawing a bench out from the wall and stepping behind it, she said:

"Permit me to decline your very courteous request."

He looked at her, surprised, yet pleased with her spirit. In her flashing eyes he saw the look with which Dauntless Jerry had held him, while Jerry and his friends were making their escape from the Occidental Saloon.

"Curse the pair! they look mightily alike—the same spirit; almost the same features. But it is impossible that she should have a brother; unless—unless— By Heaven! suppose this 'Mad Kate,' as they call her, were deceiving me, and this is not the child after all! What is the mystery of this brother, which she is so anxious should not be revealed? I'll force Mad Kate to tell me, curse her! If it should prove not to be the child after all— But, what's the odds? I get a magnificent wife; for, by Heaven, she shall be my wife! and my revenge is just as perfect, so long as the father believes that it is his daughter."

While he was thus meditating, his eyes were gloating upon her beauties of person, and her lofty yet graceful bearing.

"Won't you be persuaded?" he asked, aloud. "It is so much easier to adjust these matters amicably, you know."

"Never, you villain!" she replied, firmly.

He took a step toward her, and reached to pull away the bench. He saw her incline slightly forward, every muscle tense and eyes flashing like fire. He saw her draw her right hand slightly from the folds of her dress.

"What weapon has she there?" he asked himself; and, remembering that she had been alone in the cabin several minutes, answered: "A knife, most likely. There may have been one lying about."

Stepping back he blew a shrill whistle, muttering to himself:

"I have no particular desire to get a cut, and she might give me one—the spitfire!—before I could secure her."

His call was answered by the four men who acted as his body-guard, the fifth being yet invalid from the effects of his wound.

"Two of you tie her hands," commanded The Red Hand, tossing the cord to one of the men.

"You cowardly wretch!" cried Iola, stepping from behind the bench and extending her hands. "Are you afraid to attack an unprotected woman single-handed? I shall not scuffle with the vile tools that serve you; yet to be bound by even one of them is preferable to submitting to such an arrant knave and poltroon as you!"

"Just so," replied The Red Hand, with exasperating indifference. "But, if you please, we'll have them tied behind your back."

Nebraska Larry, the man whom, in the opening of our story, The Red Hand knocked down without apparent cause, in the Occidental Saloon, stepped forward to carry out the command of his chief. He tied Iola's hands securely, yet with a care not to pain her wrists. While thus engaged, he deftly drew her handkerchief from her pocket and transferred it to his own unobserved by any one present.

"That will do," said The Red Hand; and his body-guard withdrew.

"I am sorry to again put you to the inconvenience of riding before me in the saddle," pursued the robber chief, addressing the helpless girl, who yet stood calm and resolute before him; "but prudential reasons makes it necessary."

Knowing that she was wholly in his power, Iola followed him from the hut and permitted him to lift her to his horse's withers. Then he swung into the saddle, and set forth through the darkness at a walk. At a narrow pass which gave entrance to the pocket, he was challenged by a sentinel.

A minute later he passed the figure of a man standing motionless in the shadow of a rock. The man fell into his wake, moving cautiously, guided by the sound of his horse's hoofs. He was out of sight of The Red Hand; but an observer might have recognized in him the man who had bound Iola at his master's bidding, and stolen her handkerchief on his own account. For nearly a mile he thus tracked The Red Hand; but as the latter struck into the public highway, he let his horse out to a swinging gallop which soon distanced the man who was "shadowing" him.

When he could no longer hear the ring of the horse's hoofs in advance, Nebraska Larry gave over the pursuit with an oath, and returned slowly and thoughtfully to the stronghold.

Meanwhile The Red Hand rode for an hour on the highway; then for half an hour among the broken hills and valleys; and finally tied his horse. Letting Iola walk where the way was smooth enough, and lifting her over the rough places, he continued forward for another half-hour. The goal reached at last was a cave, whose entrance was concealed by overhanging vines. In an inner chamber he showed Iola the place destined for her habitation. A pile of wood would enable her to maintain a fire, which would supply light and warmth. A shake-down of pulled grass, covered by a buffalo-robe and blankets, served as a couch. A jug of water and food enough for three or four days were left by her jailer.

"What is wanting in comfort is more than made up in security," said The Red Hand. "You are in no danger of molestation, since not a soul in the world save myself knows of this cave. Before you will be in need of anything, I shall return with a new supply, or to take you to a new and more commodious abode. Until then, adieu!"

A large rock was nicely balanced before the inner mouth of the gallery which connected the subterranean chamber with the outer world. The Red Hand passed into the gallery, knocked out a supporting rock, and the boulder rolled so as to completely close the opening. Then the footsteps of the robber chief went down the gallery and died away.

An awful sense of desolation came over Iola, with the thought that she was immured in a living tomb, known only to her captor. What if he should be killed? Or, if he were captured by her friends, she believed that he would rather leave her to die in that awful sepulcher than reveal her whereabouts.

In that unchanging gloom and silence she had nothing by which to measure the flight of time, save only the recurrence of hunger and drowsiness, and the necessity of replenishing her fire, to avoid being left in utter darkness.

Her thoughts were of the strange life she had led in the society of a half-demented woman; of the mystery which had shrouded that life almost from its inception, and seemed just about to lift, when the rude hand of her abductor snatched her away; of the father whom she had known for scarce a minute; and of the love that had come to her life like warm showers to the parched earth. Lying with her hands over her eyes and her whole soul engaged in the effort to realize the image of her lover that rested warm in her heart, she passed much of the time in a beatific transport.

And so she waited, a helpless prisoner. What chance in the hazardous life of her jailer might leave her to die in that horrible prison! But was not even that preferable to his return?

With her mind tortured with this horrible dilemma, yet above all dreading the time which must see the beginning of her loathsome bondage, she fell into a troubled slumber, from which she awoke shrieking, shrinking with horror from his odious embrace, and sickening at his tainted breath on her cheek.

CHAPTER XX.

NEBRASKA LARRY.

"It is useless to attempt to follow them to-night," called The Stranger after Major Gravesend. "Bring the gentleman in, and Mrs. Robinson will apply restoratives."

That excellent lady, weeping and trembling with terror, assisted the major to bear his unconscious friend into the house, and they soon gathered his scattered senses.

"Your daughter is in the hands of the man they call The Red Hand," said The Stranger. "At day-break I shall take his trail, and never leave it until I place her again in your arms."

Dr. Chillingworth grasped the hand of The Stranger cordially.

"I cannot explain the feeling," he said, "but somehow or other I have every confidence in your success in anything you undertake. I cannot find words to thank you for befriending me and my child—"

"It is unnecessary," hastily interrupted The Stranger, with one of his peculiar frowns. "Even did I not owe to Miss Iola my hasty recovery, I have an old score to settle with The Red Hand, which would lead me to hunt him to his lair."

Struggling to overcome the mysterious repugnance which this man's frown inspired, Dr. Chillingworth said:

"Let us make common cause against him. No man ever wronged another more deeply than he has wronged me and mine. I have been on his track for years, but dared not attack him until I tracked him to the place where he had hidden my child. I have been deceived a hundred times, but never saw her until to-day."

Wiping her eyes on her apron, Mrs. Robinson had stood listening to the conversation. She now interposed:

"Wouldn't it be well to take Dauntless Jerry in company with you? He is a brave lad and will fight manfully for his sister."

Dr. Chillingworth turned sharply upon the speaker, his face convulsed by a sudden spasm of pain.

"Madam," he said, "what of this Dauntless Jerry? Do you know him?"

"Know him? Law bless you, sir! I've known him this twelve months. And a finer-spoken or better-intentioned young man ain't to be found in these parts—nor a sweeter or more amiable than his sister, sir."

"You call them brother and sister. I presume they are in the habit of passing as such, though they are not related in reality."

"Not related?" repeated the good widow, in amazement. "Why, bless your heart, sir! they're twins!"

A sudden pallor overspread the doctor's face, and he caught at the bed-post for support.

"You must be mistaken," he said, huskily. "The girl herself said that he was not her brother, and that she never had one to her knowledge."

"Iola said so, sir?" asked the widow, blankly.

"Yes."

"That Gentleman Sam, or, as you call him, Dauntless Jerry, was not her brother?"

"She said so."

"Surely, sir, you must have misunderstood her. She never could have said such a thing in earnest."

"These gentlemen can bear witness that she said so, and with every appearance of earnestness." The major bowed gravely. He was thinking that Iola had indulged in a very bold imposition. The Stranger sat in stern silence, with gloomy brows. While he would not permit himself to doubt her, he was altogether puzzled.

"But, gentlemen," pursued Mrs. Robinson, "a chance resemblance so perfect is impossible. They are as like as two peas except that one has short black hair and the other long blonde. Besides, everybody knows them as brother and sister, by their own acknowledgment."

"Major," said the doctor, "you have seen them. Are they so nearly alike? What is your opinion?"

His voice shook and his eyes filled. He sunk into a chair with the old despondency upon him.

Major Gravesend's eyes flashed and his cheeks crimsoned slightly with indignation, as he said, emphatically:

"It is my opinion that the girl is imposing upon you, in the hope of getting a rich father."

"Hold on there, pardner!" cried The Stranger, his speech running into dialectic form as his anger rose. "You're coming down pretty rough on a girl that isn't by to speak in her own defense. I reckon you'd better take that back."

"I'm not in the habit of swallowing my words!" returned the major, defiantly. Viewing The Stranger as a rival, he did not feel overcordial toward him.

"Gentlemen, I pray you desist!" said the doctor, starting up. "We cannot afford to have dissension among ourselves. I think there must be some mistake here. The girl has too truthful a look, even if the difficulty of successful deception was not so great. Let us present a united front to the common enemy, and seek explanation when we have recovered her."

"I hope it may be as you suggest," said the major.

And The Stranger contented himself with this half-concession.

Still it was plain that the doctor was more disturbed than his words would seem to indicate. While the tears started irresistibly in his eyes, he thought:

"If this be another disappointment—But no, I'll not allow myself to believe—And yet—oh, God! what a life I have led!"

He bowed his face in his hands, and in an agony of spirit asked himself:

"Can she be an impostor? And yet, as I remember the boy, they are too nearly alike to be strangers. Why—why have I been involved in such a network of deception and wrong?"

Major Gravesend sat with a dismal frown knitting his brows, beating a devil's tattoo on the table with his fingers. He was wishing "the whole sex to the dogs!"

The Stranger lay back in his chair with closed eyes. His late betrothed was discovered to be the daughter of a wealthy man, or was attempting to pass herself off as such by disowning her twin brother; for, though he would permit no other man to impeach Iola's veracity, The Stranger yet believed firmly in the relationship himself. If she would repudiate the tie of blood so lightly at the prompting of ambition, would she be content to link herself to an obscure adventurer like himself when her newly-acquired position and wealth would enable her to aspire to the highest in the land? But worse than this, she was in the hands of his bitterest enemy.

Mrs. Robinson, terrified by the appearance of those about her, had sunk trembling into a chair which occupied an obscure corner. As she had not witnessed the meeting between Iola and the doctor, she was wondering what had induced the girl to deny "her own flesh and blood."

Surely the hapless Iola was under a cloud. All those nearest and dearest to her had doubted her, however much they had tried to hide the fact from themselves.

That night a band of resolute men was formed, and everything got in readiness for the morrow's expedition. They would have set out immediately; but in that case torches should have been necessary to follow the trail; and they knew that an ambushade and a slaughter by invisible foes would be almost inevitable.

When The Stranger came to try his strength, he found that the pleasure of being dependent upon his fair nurse had induced him to play the invalid longer than his rugged constitution demanded. Dr. Chillingworth, too, seemed much like his own self, supported in a measure by excitement.

Following the trail, they found that it led first to Dauntless Jerry's hut in the woods. A thousand little things about the two rooms it contained gave evidence of Iola's presence. But the house was now tenantless, yet left untouched, as if its occupants had gone out on a visit. A saddle, a rifle, a pair of top-boots and various articles of male attire reminded Dr. Chillingworth painfully of Dauntless Jerry.

"They may have captured the boy, too," he said, further depressed at the thought.

"No," replied The Stranger. "There are no signs of a struggle, and I don't believe they would have caught him napping. Doubtless he was away from home."

"They gobbled Mad Kate, an' that's a fact!" said one of the men. "I wonder what the galoot wanted o' her?"

There was no ready solution to this question; and as nothing further could be gathered at the hut, the party moved on. As they advanced the trail became harder and harder to follow, from two causes. First, the soil changed from a soft loam to a rocky surface; and, second, a heavy rain, which had come on during the night, was fast washing out the few traces left. After wandering all day, the drenched and weary party had to acknowledge themselves completely at fault.

That night they bivouacked in the wilderness, and in the morning separated into two parties, the larger one under the lead of Major Gravesend, the smaller headed by The Stranger. The latter was accompanied by Dr. Chillingworth; and also of the party was Poker Tom, who now declaimed loudly against The Red Hand, to whom, in the character of a horse-thief, he seemed to have taken a peculiar aversion.

When the late second of Missouri Bill announced his intention to attach himself to The Stranger's party, the latter showed his acquiescence by silence; but, there was an ominous glitter in his eyes and set to his lips, which might have warned the gambler, had he observed them, that the first symptom of treachery on his part would be visited by swift death.

It was arranged that the two parties should scour the country in search of The Red Hand's retreat; and a rendezvous was appointed where scouts from either party could effect intercommunication.

It was about the middle of the afternoon of the second day, that The Stranger's party were startled by the appearance of a man standing directly in their path, with his hands held above his head, the palms to the front.

"Who are you?" demanded The Stranger, stopping within a few feet of him.

"A man who has the will and the knowledge which will put The Red Hand in your power before sunset," replied the dark-browed stranger.

"By my soul!" cried Poker Tom, "but it's Nebraska Larry!—him that's thicker than seven in a bed with The Red Hand! Gents, I go my pile that he leads us into a nice leetle ambush, that'll cost us all our hides!"

"Are you a member of The Red Hand's band?" asked The Stranger, sternly.

"Yes," admitted Nebraska Larry, coolly.

"Are not you endangering your neck by placing yourself in our power?"

"I think not," replied Larry.

"I suppose you know that we are after the chief of cut-throats and all his subordinates?"

"I am aware of the fact."

"Then how do you expect to escape?"

"By making terms with you."

"What are your terms?"

"I propose to betray The Red Hand into your power before sunset, and leave the rest of the boys to shift for themselves. I have nothing against them; but I'd give my neck rather than he should escape the noose. Without my help, you might hunt for him twenty years and be no nearer finding him than you are now. The price of this help is an engagement on your part that I shall go free."

"What evidence have we that you are not about to lead us into an ambush?"

"Do you see that scar?" asked the man, raising his black hair from his temple. As he did so his face flushed purple, and his eyes glittered until he looked like a demon of fury.

"Well?" asked The Stranger.

"It is a rule in the band that we shall never address our leader, who is The Red Hand, by any title. I accidentally began to call him captain, and some of the men here present saw me knocked down before the words were out of my mouth. Do you think men of my stamp are apt to forget such a thing as that?"

He drew himself erect, with flashing eye and dilating nostril. He was a man above the ordinary level, as was indicated by speech and mien; and the indignity must have cut him deeply.

"I have had my finger on the trigger to shoot him a score of times since," he pursued; "but I thought better of it, and reserved his neck for the hangman. If you wish further security, let me go on before you, where you can keep your pistol on me."

"That's fair!" cried The Stranger, the smoldering fire of his hatred flaming up lurid through his eyes. "Lead on! Let me get my grip on the throat of The Red Hand, and I swear that no man shall raise a hand against you until he has passed over my dead body!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE DILEMMA.

"MEANWHILE," pursued The Stranger, drawing his pistol and frowning menacingly, "it is needless for me to tell you that you will be held to strict account for your behavior, and anything having the slightest appearance of treachery will forfeit your life. Lead on!"

"Let me second the motion, Cap'n," said Poker Tom, also drawing his weapon and coming to the side of The Stranger. "I reckon the galoot'll git plugged, ef he don't carry himself straighter'n H!"

"Pick out any other three men in your company; but I don't want that hound at my back," said Nebraska Larry, frowning darkly at Poker Tom. "Being in my rear, he'd find an excuse for shooting me inside of half an hour."

"Maybe you think I don't dast to shoot you to yer face!" cried Poker Tom, with a fierce oath; and as he spoke he aimed his cocked pistol at the breast of the other.

Like a flash Nebraska Larry's pistol shot forth, so that Poker Tom could look directly down the barrel.

"Drop that weapon, you cowardly whelp!" he cried, in a ringing voice. "Drop it!"

So imperious was his tone and look that the gambler was cowed. Blanching to the lips, he let his arm sink to his side, almost involuntarily.

"I reckon this hyar hain't the time to quarrel with yeou," he said, with a scowl of malignant hatred. "After yeou've showed us The Red Hand, I allow yeou'll git attended to."

"I want your word that that dog shall not shoot me while my eyes is off of him," said Nebraska Larry to The Stranger, not deigning another look at the gambler bully.

"I'll guarantee that," was the reply. "Put up your weapon, Poker Tom. When you're wanted, you'll be called on."

Scowling darkly, the gambler slunk away.

"Lead on!" commanded The Stranger to Nebraska Larry.

Without more ado the robber turned upon his heel and strode forward, followed by the others.

The sun was already below the horizon and the woods were fast being enshrouded in the gloom of night, when The Stranger stopped his guide. Suspiciously he said:

"Look here, my friend. I thought we were to have The Red Hand before sunset."

"You know for yourself that I have come in the most direct line possible; and when I tell you that we are within half a mile of the spot he is to camp in to-night, you will see that thus far I have preserved the appearance at least of sincerity."

"That's straight. I have nothing further to say."

They now advanced with greater caution, and in due course of time they descried the light of a camp-fire, surrounded by four men. The Red Hand's body-guard consisted of five men. One was still invalid from the wound he had received on the night of the duel in the Occidental Saloon. One had been sent on a scouting expedition, and was now about to betray his chief into the hands of the enemy. The other three were with their principal.

"There is your game. It only remains for you to bag it," said Nebraska Larry. "I have but one request—that you will not shoot The Red Hand, at least so as to kill, but give him the full benefit of a rope-end!"

"No fear but he'll get his deserts!" muttered The Stranger, his eyes glowing like coals.

Dividing his company into three parties, he arranged a surround, the attack to begin at a signal from him. Himself heading one of the parties which was to move off at right angles on either side, leaving the third where it was, he placed the other under Dr. Chillingworth. Among his own party he numbered Poker Tom and Nebraska Larry, determined to keep them under his own eye.

"One word," said the doctor, grasping his hand earnestly. "Do not kill The Red Hand outright. I must have a word with him before he dies. This is all important, believe me! Have I your promise?"

"I have no intention of giving him so honorable a death as shooting," replied The Stranger, grimly. "I owe him too much for that!"

And so they parted.

Poker Tom affected great eagerness and vigilance, creeping forward with his pistol held in readiness. Presently The Stranger saw him stumble, clutch hastily at a bush, as if to save himself from falling, and in the act his pistol exploded. It was all done very naturally, and all of the party but two—The Stranger and Nebraska Larry—supposed it an accident. They knew better.

"Die! you infernal traitor!" cried The Stranger.

His pistol belched forth a sheet of flame, and Poker Tom fell heavily to the ground.

"Come on, men!" commanded The Stranger in a ringing voice; and turning sharply toward the fire, he led the way through the brush with great bounds.

"Shoot every villain that resists!" he yelled, as he bounded into the open space around the camp-fire. "Surrender, you black-hearted varlets! Down with you arms, every mother's son of you!"

Warned by Poker Tom's treacherous shot, the robbers were already upon their feet, with weapons drawn. The Red Hand made an attempt to kick out the fire, at the same time aiming a shot at The Stranger, who was the first man to appear. The one action defeated the other, and The Stranger kept on unharmed.

Seeing more at his back, the robbers discharged a volley, and turned to dash into the woods in the opposite direction. But they were met by the party under Dr. Chillingworth. Another volley, and they turned sharply to the left, directly in the face of the third party.

"Rally!" yelled The Red Hand. "Charge! No quarter! Freedom or the hangman's noose!"

A rattling volley, and the four men of the third party went to the ground together.

"Hurrah!" shouted the robber chief. "Now for it. Scatter!"

But a deadly fire poured in from both sides put his three companions beyond the power of flight. A shot from Dr. Chillingworth crippled the right hand of the chief, so that his pistol dropped to the ground; while The Stranger skillfully tumbled him in a heap with a broken leg.

One of the robbers lay on his face, stone dead. Another was faintly gasping his last with the blood streaming from a wound in his side. The third being supported in a partially sitting position by the trunk of a tree, aimed a final shot at his foes.

"Surrender!" cried the doctor, hesitating to shoot him.

"Never!" was the defiant reply; and aiming his pistol into his own ear, the ruffian escaped the gallows by suicide.

Seeing him, The Red Hand tried to follow his example; for he found himself in the power of two of his deadliest foes. But at that instant he caught sight of Nebraska Larry, and realized his treachery; and with a fierce oath of fury he aimed at his heart, shouting:

"That for your recompense, you treacherous devil!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Larry, as he leaped to one side; and the ball sped harmlessly by.

With a fierce oath, the baffled chief turned his pistol upon himself; but Nebraska Larry's heavy boot kicked the weapon from his hand.

The Red Hand next drew his knife; but he was disarmed, only having succeeded in inflicting a slight wound on his right breast.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Nebraska Larry.

"Are we quits, old man?"

The Red Hand only glared at him with blood-shot eyes, foaming at the mouth with impotent rage.

"We are not yet quits!" said The Stranger, confronting his fallen foe with the sternness of an avenger.

"Have not I an account to settle with you?" demanded Dr. Chillingworth.

The Red Hand rolled his eyes until they found the face of the last speaker. Then his features were distorted by a laugh of fiendish malignity.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Not a word; but he looked and laughed again:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Horried by the hidden significance of that laugh, Dr. Chillingworth caught at a sapling for support.

"Where is my child?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"You devil! what have you done with her?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed The Red Hand.

"Ah!" cried the doctor, with a sudden thought.

"We shall defeat you after all! The man who betrayed you into our power can lead us to your stronghold; and my darling will be rescued in spite of you!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed the fallen chief again; and he rolled his eyes to the face of Nebraska Larry.

"We can depend upon your guidance, can we not?" asked Dr. Chillingworth, turning appealingly toward the traitor robber.

"The girl is not at the stronghold—if you refer to Gentleman Sam's sister. He took her away night before last," replied Nebraska Larry, with a shake of the head.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed The Red Hand, more devilishly than ever.

"Do not you know where she is?" asked the doctor, with painful anxiety.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" came in that laugh again, like some mocking fiend.

"No," replied Larry. "Make him tell you."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed the robber chief. Then rubbing his hands in ghoul-like glee, he repeated: "Make him tell you! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha-a-a!"

His laugh ended in a long-drawn shriek of mocking hilarity.

It seemed to sting Dr. Chillingworth into new life.

"I'll stop your merriment, at any rate, you accursed fiend!" he cried. "See what I have prepared for you!"

As he spoke, he uncoiled from his waist a rope whose use was not to be mistaken. At sight of it, the men set up a cheer; but The Red Hand regarded it unmoved, and laughed again.

At this point, all were startled by a groan. In contemplation of the intense emotion of The Stranger and Dr. Chillingworth and the fiendish malignity of The Red Hand, the men had forgotten their fallen comrades.

"We have neglected these poor fellows too long. Assist me here, men. And, doctor, here is opportunity for your skill."

"I will do all that I can to alleviate their sufferings; but I must confess to you that I am not a physician. The title is part of a disguise I adopted while following yonder villain."

"Well, let us examine them, and do what we can. This one is beyond all relief."

Of the four men who had comprised the third party, two were found to be dead and the remaining two severely wounded, so effective had been the last volley of the robbers. In The Stranger's party, one man had fallen with two bullets in his body, dead, perhaps, before he struck the ground. The Stranger himself was bleeding from two wounds, one in the shoulder, and one in the side, where a bullet had ranged along a rib. In Dr. Chillingworth's party, three men were wounded—one severely, two slightly.

The survivors frowned darkly when they summed up their loss.

"Three dead men and six wounded!" said The Stranger. "Those fellows knew how to fight, at any rate."

"I reckon their chief orter hang powerful high for this!" muttered one of the men.

"No fear but he'll get hanging enough!" replied The Stranger, with one of his peculiar frowns. "You'll find another out in the brush yonder. I settled his account, so as to save a bullet in the back, perhaps."

"Let him go. I reckon he'll keep," replied one of the men.

Had they gone to look for Poker Tom, they would have discovered that he was not to be found; but so enraged were they at his treachery, that no one cared to see whether or not he lay wounded, needing their care; but all addressed themselves to collecting the dead and making the wounded as comfortable as possible.

"And now, gentlemen," said the doctor, when this had been accomplished, "let us have this rope over yonder limb, and test the efficacy of hanging!"

"You fool! you dare not hang me!" said The Red Hand, coolly.

"And why not?" demanded the doctor, tying the noose with his own hand; for the man had sprung to the work with a will, and the rope was already dangling across the limb.

"For your daughter's sake, I have placed her where she can get neither bread nor water, save from my hand. What will become of her, do you think, if you stop the breath of the only man who can find her?"

"I intend to make your secret the price of your life!" replied the doctor, coolly, adjusting the noose about the neck of the robber chief.

"Fugh! you are a fool, as I said before! Do you think me such an idiot as to purchase my life from you, only to be given over to these devils? Have you the dignity of the name of a Vigilance Committee, gentlemen?"

The Red Hand spoke with a fierce sneer of mock courtesy.

"We're 'vigilance' enough fur you!" replied one of the men; and the rest joined in a deep rumble of wrathful assent.

"Hoist away!" commanded the doctor.

Out of the fourteen men—including Poker Tom—who had composed the attacking party, Dr. Chillingworth, Nebraska Larry and two other men had escaped without injury; but those who were only slightly wounded sprung to lay a hand on the rope; and The Red Hand swung clear of the ground in a twinkling. His agonized writhings were terrible to behold, and must have moved any hearts not steeled by long years of wrong, or made callous by daily scenes of semi-barbarism. He clutched spasmodically at the rope above his head; but his right hand had been rendered helpless by the doctor's bullet.

"Let him down!" commanded the doctor, when the purple visage of the wretch showed that he was at the point of suffocation.

The men obeyed. They were willing to prolong the torture as much as possible. Dr. Chillingworth loosened the noose; and The Red Hand lay in a heap, gasping for breath.

"Where is my daughter?" demanded the doctor, when the robber chief was able to speak.

"Where sho will suffer the pangs of starvation—where she will burn with thirst! Ha! ha! my suffering—"

"Hoist away!" commanded the doctor; and the bitter words were stopped in the throat of the obdurate robber.

Again a scene from which the eye turns in horror. The pride of the savage (whether white or red) could enable the crime-stained man to face death resolutely and with a calmness born of bravado; but no will could compose the muscles when the body was in the actual grasp of death.

"Lower away!" came the stern command; and again a mass of quivering humanity lay upon the ground.

"Where is my daughter?"

The doctor's voice was implacable.

"Where she will die and rot, curse you! but you will never see—"

"Hoist away!"

The doctor was a man of ice. His voice was as steady as if his victim had been a bale of merchandise.

This time the struggles were faint, consisting of only now and then an involuntary twitching of the limbs; but the contortion of feature, the protrusion of eye-balls, was horrible in the extreme.

"Lower away!" commanded the doctor, when the blood began to issue from the nose and ears.

The men obeyed, but their victim lay motionless.

"Here! a canteen—quick! He is dying! Great God! if he should die now!"

Dr. Chillingworth poured the liquor down the throat of the unconscious robber chief, and after a time restored him to consciousness.

"Oh, curse you! have you brought me back?" was the salutation of The Red Hand, when he saw the face of his foe bending over him.

Instantly the doctor was the stern judge again.

"Where is my daughter?" he demanded, as unmoved as ever.

The Red Hand made no reply, but lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily. Presently his head sagged slightly to one side, and his eyelids opened slightly.

Dr. Chillingworth arose from his kneeling posture and turned to The Stranger.

"The man is asleep," he said. "What can I do? I dare not suspend him again. He would never survive it. And if he should die, what would become of my child? Advise me."

"I know of no stronger motive than love of life," replied The Stranger, gloomily. "If his revenge is stronger than that, and keeps him silent, I confess that I am at a loss how to move him."

"Suppose we promise him his freedom if he releases her? He can be hunted down at any time afterward."

"Try it."

"But suppose the men should object?"

"I think I could persuade them!" replied The Stranger, and his eye roamed with a sort of contempt over the knot of men still waiting at the other end of the rope. The empty noose swung in the wind with ghastly suggestiveness.

Dr. Chillingworth knelt beside The Red Hand, and shook him into wakefulness, from that sleep which is sometimes induced by the exhaustion following intense agony. The robber chief awoke with a start.

"What! you again?" he snarled. "May the devil claim his own!"

And he turned away his head wearily.

"See here!" persisted the doctor, "I have a proposal to make. You have had a spice of what awaits you if you remain obdurate; if, on the other hand, you release my daughter, you shall go free. Do you consent?"

The Red Hand turned his face toward the doctor, fiendish with malignant triumph and deathless hatred.

"Never!" he cried, with something of his old vigor. "I have you both, curse you! in hav-

ing her! So do your worst! Ha! ha! ha!" he added, leering at The Stranger, "are we quits now? So you love her, do you? Well, you will have the consolation of reflecting, for the next four or five days, that she is dying a lingering death; unless she has wit enough to dash her head against the rocks, and so escape the hellish gnawing of hunger. Did you ever starve until you cursed God, man and fortune? Ha! ha! it is a glorious revenge!"

The doctor turned away, sick at heart.

"It is no use!" he said. "My God! what shall we do?"

Any answer to the question was cut short by a hurtling sound in the air. Before they had time to think, The Stranger and Dr. Chillingworth were dashed together and thrown upon the ground; and a rattling volley brought to the ground three out of the five men holding the rope. A wild yell—a rush—and the little glade swarmed with men.

The Red Hand struggled to a sitting posture; heard their wild cheer—"Hurrah for Poker Tom!"—and with a diabolical smile of triumph sunk back unconscious.

CHAPTER XXII.

FICKLE FORTUNE.

THE bullet fired by The Stranger at Poker Tom grazed his temple, partially stunning him for the moment. He arose to his feet, however, just in time to see the party of The Red Hand overpowered. He turned, and with swift, gliding steps sought security in flight.

At a distance of a few miles he ran upon another camp, which proved to consist of a dozen men, with about a score of horses. Boldly the gambler stalked forward, until commanded to halt by a sentinel.

"I come as a friend," he said, "with the news that The Red Hand has just been gobbled up."

Instantly the men crowded about him, while one of them asked:

"Who are you, and what do you know of The Red Hand?"

"I'm Poker Tom, at your sarvico, and my name's a pretty fair show of my mode of life. The Red Hand's the man what cracks the whip when he wants yeou galoots to come to taw. I reckon, though, he hain't long fur this airth, ef yeou don't take a hand in a leetle game in which he held the loosin' keards."

A rapid interchange of questions and answers soon put the camping party in possession of the facts, and assured them of Poker Tom's loyalty to their interests; and they were soon on the way to rescue.

A skillfully-thrown lariat brought The Stranger and Dr. Chillingworth to the ground, bound by the same noose. Before they could draw knife or pistol, to release themselves or beat off their foes, the robbers were upon them; and they were soon securely bound, hand and foot. Of the rest of the party, all were shot down or forced to surrender except one, who effected his escape in the darkness.

As we have said, The Red Hand sunk back unconscious, when he heard the shout of victory of his adherents. He received instant attention, and was made as comfortable as possible until morning.

When the camp was astir, The Red Hand called for Poker Tom. The gambler presented himself with a conscious swagger.

"My man," said the robber chief, scanning him sharply from head to foot, "if I remember rightly, you acted as second to Missouri Bill, when he passed in his checks?"

"Boss, yeou're a-cacklin' tenor!" replied Poker Tom.

"The same night you sided with me, when I got in chancery?"

"Boss, yeou're a-whistlin' bass, fur sure!"

"And last night you brought these fellows to the rescue?"

"Now, boss, yeou're jest a-shoutin' in the high notes! I reckon yeou'd been laid on the shelf by this time, ef it hadn't been fur yer humble sarvant!"

"Why have you befriended me and my men?"

"Wal, ye see I knowed as how yeou was gents as was gents, the fust clatter; an' I never had the stomach to see a boss sharp walked over by a lot o' cattle jest because he was down—that's the how!"

"Such evidences of friendship should not go unrewarded."

"Wal, boss, I leave that to yeou."

"How can I repay you?"

"I'm to make the trump myself?"

"If you please."

"Wal, boss, when yeou truss up that thar chicken"—pointing to The Stranger—"let me have the fust hand on the rope!"

"I don't propose to hang him just now. I have further business with him," replied The Red Hand, with a black scowl.

"But when he gits his send-off, I'll have a hand in?"

"Yes, if I don't conclude to settle accounts with him with my own hand. But is that all you ask?"

"Have you anything else to give?"

"Money?"

"Stow yer money!"

"Horses?"

"Humph! They'd be a through ticket fur a free swing, ef I got ketched with one!"

The Red Hand regarded the gambler closely, as if to divine what lay beneath his replies. Then he said, slowly:

"My friend, I reckon you haven't led a strictly Christian life?"

"I allow they could spot me fur everything in the calendar, from carryin' a pair of aces in my sleeve to rib-stickin'!"

"Suppose you join our brotherhood."

"Boss, that's jest the music my year's been a-ticklin' fur, this half-hour! I'm yer huckleberry, fur ninety days!"

"Well, my men are in the habit of earning their positions. You know the traitor Nebraska Larry. When you bring me his scalp, my men shall salute you as first-lieutenant, in place of Missouri Bill."

"Good 'nough! Boss, let's strike palms on that!"

"And now," said The Red Hand, when that ceremony was performed, "let us see your skill at hanging. String up every one but these two."

Under the lead of Poker Tom, who sought the work with avidity, eager for a chance to show his zeal, the wounded and the helpless prisoners were suspended to the limb on which The Red Hand had so nearly expiated all his crimes. They bore themselves manfully, none deigning to ask mercy of the hand they knew was ruthless.

When The Red Hand had thus in a measure sated his vengeance, the band took up the line of march toward their mountain stronghold, bearing their chief on a rudely-constructed litter.

Bound to the backs of horses, The Stranger and Dr. Chillingworth were led away, captive, by their bitterest foe. The former betrayed no emotion whatever, but the latter rode with his head hanging despondently upon his breast, and tears of anguish trickling slowly down his beard. It was more terrible to know that his daughter was in the power of this fiendish outlaw, as a woman, than it had been as an infant. Then there was the possibility of rescue, but now—

"Oh, God! the only ones who could help her are helpless!"

He might have rebelled against Providence, had he had the strength; but, crushed by his great sorrow, he could only weep.

With the face of a demon, The Red Hand had addressed his followers:

"Men, keep your wits busy while we march. The man who invents the most cruel torture shall receive promotion!"

And turning to his prisoners with a brutal laugh, he added:

"But I have a rare treat for you of my own devising. You shall witness our nuptials. Ha! ha! ha! the law requires two witnesses, does it not? But one formality we will be forced to dispense with—the priest! Ecod! we're anything but priests, we free rovers! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

These thoughts were tearing the heart of both lover and parent. The one wept; the agony of the other found expression only in the beads of sweat that stood thick upon his brow, when he thought that he was helpless—utterly helpless!

When they entered the defile which gave admittance to the robbers' home, and saw the huts, even the stout heart of The Stranger failed him; and his head sunk upon his breast, while his heart seemed rent asunder by a sob his firm-set lips would not let escape. A moment more and he should see her—oh God! in what a plight!

But, suddenly, his ears are greeted by a ringing discharge of small-arms, followed by a rallying shout; and in his immediate vicinity cries of human agony and the shrieking neigh of terrified and wounded animals. Then the wild confusion of a stampede suddenly checked and thrown back upon itself, frantic oaths, desperate commands, the rattling crack of revolvers, and cheer upon cheer of triumphant assailants. Then a headlong scattering of terror-maddened horses, some bestridden, some riderless.

From out the dust and smoke a horseman dashed up to The Stranger. His bonds were severed and a pistol thrust into his hand.

"Put in a shot or two for the good of humanity!" shouted a voice; and turning, The Stranger recognized Dauntless Jerry, bareheaded, his raven locks swept from his temples by the wind, and his eyes blazing with excitement.

"God bless you, boy! Where is your sister?" cried The Stranger.

"War first and chin-music afterward!" shouted the youth in return, as he dashed away.

The Stranger was not slow to take in the situation. A score of men, with Dauntless Jerry at their head, had evidently got possession of the stronghold and set an ambush for the returning robbers. The surprised freebooters fought with the desperation of men who knew that escape was set over against the noose. But, they were outnumbered, their horses ren-

dered almost unmanageable, and the fight turned into a mad chase about the glen—a running massacre!

Only one of the robbers fought on the offensive. It was Poker Tom. The Stranger saw him spur like the wind toward Nebraska Larry, as if to ride him down. The traitor horse-thief fired at his assailant, bringing his horse all in a heap to the ground. But Poker Tom slipped from the saddle, alighting upon his feet, and aiming across the body of his writhing animal, perforated Nebraska Larry's breast. Bounding forward, he drew a knife, and the next instant swung aloft the reeking scalp of his fallen foe, with a wild Camanche war-whoop.

But it was his last. The Stranger had now spurred his horse within range; and his unerring aim laid the gambler a quivering mass upon the ground.

Later, Dauntless Jerry was chasing a robber by the litter on which lay the helpless chief. The Red Hand raised upon his right elbow, despite the excruciating pain that darted from his shattered hand, and aimed at the youth. But The Stranger was upon him, a hand clutching his throat, and a pistol at his ear. Then there was a piercing shriek:

"Stop! Stop! *It is your father!*"

A woman with streaming hair, rushing from the direction of the huts, threw herself upon The Stranger's arm, breaking his hold upon the throat of The Red Hand, and forcing the latter upon his back.

The Stranger recoiled, not fully comprehending the import of that cry. He saw the woman sink across the body of the robber chief. He saw the latter recover himself, and with an oath place his pistol at the head of the woman. He sprang forward and prevented the murder, himself receiving a slight wound before he disarmed the ruffian. The woman raised her face up appealingly and said:

"Don't kill him! *He is your father!*"

Then a gush of blood streamed from mouth and nostrils, her head dropped, and she was still!

In the struggle for the possession of the pistol The Stranger had set his knee upon the broken leg of The Red Hand, and the latter had fainted from the pain. Leaving him thus, The Stranger raised the woman in his arms and bore her back to the huts. Laying her upon a couch, he saw that she was already dead. From her bosom had slipped a miniature, suspended to her neck by a ribbon. As he caught sight of the setting his heart gave a great bound. It was a counterpart to the one he had worn from infancy!

Turning it over, he saw that it was the picture of a young boy. Then he drew forth his own, and compared it with the face of the dead. A moment's scrutiny, and he fell sobbing upon his knees, covering the unresponsive face with tears and kisses.

"Oh! mother! mother! found only to be lost again!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WRONG MADE RIGHT.

"Is he dead?"

"Dead as a nit; an' it's a doggauned shame; fur he was as peart a kid as ever handled shootin' irons, an' would 'a' made a boss sharp in time!"

"What do you say? Dead?—Dauntless Jerry dead?"

The Stranger brushed by the last speaker, and knelt beside the prostrate form. Dauntless Jerry lay upon his side, his lips apart, his expressionless eyes just visible between the half-shut lids. There was dust in his hair, on his cheek, and on his clothes.

With a regretful look, thinking how the blow would fall upon Iola, The Stranger knelt beside him. He took the cold, nerveless hand in his; then thrust his other hand beneath the serape-like blanket, which Jerry always wore huddled about his shoulders, to feel if the heart yet beat. Instantly a quick cry of surprise escaped his lips, and he turned his face to the crowd as if to speak. But checking himself, while a purple flush mounted to his brow and receded again, he bent over the youth and gazed into his face with an expression of wonder and mystification.

"What is the matter?" asked one of the crowd, puzzled by his strange emotions.

"Nothing," replied The Stranger, absently.

Then he lifted the youth in his arms and carried him to one of the huts, followed by the curious crowd. Having laid him on a bed, he turned to the men who had entered the hut and said:

"Gentlemen, although nearly a stranger, I am more deeply interested in the boy than any one else, in the absence of his sister. Will you leave me alone with him?"

The ruder spirits yielded to his commanding air, and he was left alone, as he desired, though his strange behavior provoked much speculation. But other duties called them away, and soon drove the subject from their minds.

First the wounded had to be cared for. Then two of the robbers who had survived, though wounded, were tried before Judge Lynch and hanged before their own doors. At the urgent petition of Dr. Chillingworth the robber chief

was reprieved, until the secret of Iola's confinement could be extorted from him. Next came the burial of friend and foe.

When Nebraska Larry was raised, he gave signs of life by a faint groan. Restoratives were immediately applied; and when he became conscious, he asked:

"Have you hanged The Red Hand?"

"No," replied one of the men. "He'll get worse, if he don't tell the doctor what he has done with his daughter."

"Where is Dr. Chillingworth? Fetch him here," said Nebraska Larry, scarcely above a whisper.

The doctor was brought.

"Hang that devil without delay," said Larry.

"Your daughter is safe."

"Safe!" repeated the father, grasping the hand of the dying man. "In Heaven's name, where is she?"

"You will find her at home. I tracked her with a hound. Bring The Red Hand before me, and I will make him acknowledge all."

The Red Hand was hurried into the room, as Nebraska Larry's excitement was fast burning his life away. At sight of the man who had knocked him down, Larry raised upon his elbow about to speak; but the robber chief anticipated him with a laugh.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! So Poker Tom kept his pledge; and I hereby proclaim him lieutenant, as agreed. Pardner, your head would make a fine-looking wig-block. Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"They laugh best who laugh last," said Larry.

"How does it please you to be balked at every point? Your life-long enemies are uninjured and triumphant, through my instrumentality; for I put your neck in the noose yesterday, just as I entrapped you and your cut-throats to-day!"

"You pitiful fool," retorted The Red Hand, "these dead dogs, who have snapped at my bidding so long, are nothing to me. As for the triumph of my enemies, why don't they hang me? Ha! Ha! Ha! They dare not! They know that the girl would starve. I shall make my terms with them, while I hold her as hostage."

"You lie!" cried Nebraska Larry, exultantly. "I have balked you there; and in two minutes I shall see your worthless neck stretched on yonder tree, just before the window. Did it not occur to you that the hound could track you, no matter how carefully your trail was concealed? I followed you to that secret cave; drew the vines from the entrance; pried away the bowlder; and found the girl in terror, just aroused from a nightmare in which she thought herself in your loathsome embrace. Ha! Ha! Ha! Who laughs now? Gentlemen, away with him! And hang him from yonder limb, where I can see him!"

The truth of Nebraska Larry's statement was manifest. The Red Hand was struck dumb. With a wild hurrah the men seized him, and bore him beneath the fatal limb. The rope was hastily adjusted, and ready hands waited to give the death tug. Then Dr. Chillingworth stepped before the doomed man.

"Horace Clifton," he said, his face twitching nervously, "the enmity between us has been bitter and of long duration. Before you die, I wish to disclaim any hostility toward you, except such as has grown out of the great wrong you have done me. Here, in the presence of that God before whom you are so shortly to go, I forgive you for that wrong! Have you anything to say?"

"Yes," replied The Red Hand. "Let me see my wife—the woman who entered your house as Mrs. Henderson, and whom they now call Mad Kate."

"She is dead," replied the doctor, solemnly.

"Dead!" repeated the robber chief, with the first manifestation of tender emotion.

"She died upon your breast," said Dr. Chillingworth. "When The Stranger lifted her, she was gone."

"There is a golden cross upon her neck. Bring it to me."

It was brought.

The Red Hand touched it to his lips, and gazed upon it for a long time in deep thought. Then he raised his eyes and said:

"She loved me as woman never loved man before; I wronged her as man never before wronged the woman of his love! That she has forgiven me all, I know, even though the Almighty has turned away."

"Say to the man whom you call The Stranger that his name is Horace Clifton. He will bear it, although it has been sullied by so base a wretch as I, because it was given to him by a mother who loved him better even than she loved me; and I believe that she placed me before her God. Tell him, also, that he did not kill the woman whom he knew as Donna Pepita. She lies yonder, under the name of Nebraska Larry, waiting to witness my death. I do not blame her. I have been a hard master to her for a dozen years."

"Shall I have your son brought to you?" asked the doctor.

"No; I do not wish to see him. And now I have but one word to say to you. You cannot be ignorant of the motive which has induced my hatred of you and yours. Before you mar-

ried her, Maud Belknap deliberately won my heart only to cast it beneath her feet. I do not pretend to say how far the sanction of society affects the morality of such an action; but at her door lies the responsibility of turning a man, with the ordinary mixture of good and bad in his nature, into a fiend! You may think me already sufficiently bad, having deprived my wife of her child, and courted another woman while she was yet alive. But I took the boy away from her because I thought her unfit to have him—but here I acknowledge my error; for I now believe her as pure a woman as ever lived—and when I sought Maud Belknap I supposed my wife was dead. I say again, then, that she is responsible for what I am. She paid her life for it; and I presume we are quits. In so far as my revenge has extended to others, it is perhaps right that it should be frustrated.

"And now, gentlemen, all I ask of you is to make quick work of me!"

Sick at heart, Dr. Chillingworth, or, more properly, George Kingslake turned away. It was the signal for a tug on the rope, and the next instant Horace Clifton, The Red Hand, was writhing in the air.

Nebraska Larry, or, to use a name indicative of her sex, the Countess Pepita started upright in bed, at the sound of the "Heave-ho!" that signaled the execution of the robber chief.

"Die, you devil! die!" she cried, vengefully, and then sunk back dead.

But scarcely was The Red Hand in the air, when George Kingslake, as we shall now call him, turned and cried:

"Let him down! For God's sake let him down one moment!"

Startled by his excitement, the men let go the rope and the robber chief fell to the ground.

"Oh, curse you! have you brought me back?" he cried, when he recovered consciousness.

"I could not let you die before you had settled one doubt," said George Kingslake. "If this is really my daughter, who is the man she calls her brother? Of course she can have no brother; and yet they look most wonderfully alike."

"I do not know," replied The Red Hand. "I am as much in the dark as you. But I think the girl herself can tell you."

"Are you telling me the truth?" asked the agonized parent.

"Before God, it is the truth!"

"The boy is dead; but I have the assurance of the woman you call Pepita that my daughter is at home. Do you believe that she spoke the truth?"

"She has certainly been at the cave where your daughter was confined; and she has no motive for deceiving you. And now have not you tortured me enough? Take this accursed rope from my neck, and let me die by the bullet!"

"Gentlemen," said George Kingslake, "in mercy let us comply with this request. The same end will be reached, no matter by what means his death is accomplished."

With one accord the men threw down the rope. Ten were then selected, who chose prepared pistols at random, five of which were loaded with blank cartridges; and The Red Hand died with four bullets in his brain and a wound on the side of the head, so accurate were the shots.

The interrupted burial of the dead was now resumed; and when the sun had passed beneath the horizon, only The Red Hand, Mad Kate and Dauntless Jerry remained unburied. George Kingslake had suggested that The Stranger, or Horace Clifton, the younger, would wish to provide sepulture for his parents.

All this time The Stranger had remained in the hut with the body of Dauntless Jerry. He now came forth with a strange expression on his face.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I desire to have my young friend buried apart from the rest. Will you indulge me by digging his grave in yonder grove?"

He indicated a secluded spot, and the men set to work.

When the message of The Red Hand was delivered, The Stranger was much affected, and gave directions that litters should be prepared on which his parents might be borne to the city.

Then he lifted Dauntless Jerry in his arms and proceeded slowly and sadly to the grave. George Kingslake betrayed little interest in the boy. He felt a sort of jealousy of him. Who was he? What had he been to his daughter? How came that strange resemblance between them?

Beside the open grave The Stranger laid down his burden, and drawing from the still white face a fold of the serape-like blanket which he had thrown over it, he asked:

"Would any one like to take a last look?"

One or two stepped up out of curiosity; but the rest felt little interest in a comparative stranger. But Horace Clifton (to give him his proper name) seemed deeply affected, and said:

"Gentlemen, if you will leave me with him a few minutes, I will fill in the grave, and be ready to start with you soon."

He placed the body tenderly in the shallow

grave; and while he knelt down beside it they left him in the gathering gloom.

George Kingslake was anxious to seek his daughter; but a strange feeling seemed to bind him to the son of his enemy, and he waited his return from the grave of Dauntless Jerry. Now he could account for the frown that had affected him so strangely. It was the counterpart of a never-to-be-forgotten frown which he had seen on the face of Horace Clifton the elder more than twenty years before.

One night, before his marriage to Maud Kingslake, he had sought her in the garden, away from the dazzling light and heat of the ball-room. She had suddenly sprung into his arms with a cry of terror. Then he saw Horace Clifton, standing in the shadow of the vines which clambered over a rustic summer-house, his brows black with a frown of malignant hatred which had been stamped indelibly on the memory of his successful rival.

He had never pressed Maud for an explanation of that scene. He had always supposed, and he now knew, that she had flirted with the fiery Southerner, and then roused his fierce nature by repulsing his suit.

When the son of his old enemy came slowly back from the grove, George Kingslake extended his hand and said:

"Your father and I have been deadly foes for nearly twenty years; but let the feud go out with his life. Let us start anew to-day, and start friends."

Horace Clifton grasped the frankly proffered hand, with an earnestness which made his eyes humid.

"Do you propose it?" he said. "I cannot express to you how heartily I accept."

Then the procession took up the line of march; for the anxious father could not bear the delay of waiting until morning. It was nearly day-break when they reached Dauntless Jerry's hut. Impatient to see her, the father and lover urged their horses forward. They found a light in the hut; and as they approached, a shadow flitted across the window curtain, the door swung open, and Iola stood framed in the doorway, peering out into the darkness.

"Thank God!" my daughter, alive and well!" cried George Kingslake; and spurring his horse to the very door, he threw himself from the saddle and clasped her in his arms.

Horace Clifton had generously held back, allowing the father to receive his daughter's first caress. He presently dismounted and came within the range of light. As soon as Iola caught sight of him, she drew herself from her father's arms and cast herself upon her lover's breast.

"Oh! Horace! Horace!" she cried, nestling in his arms.

The father's feeling was a keen pang of jealousy; but when the pair stood before him so smiling and beautiful, he joined their hands and gave them his blessing, with happy tears in his eyes.

"Didn't I tell you I should be your promised wife before you told me anything about yourself?" laughed Iola, mischievously.

"The developments of the last twenty-four hours have left little to tell," replied Horace, smiling. "Years ago, when returning from California, where I had made quite a fortune, I fell in with a man in New Orleans who represented himself as a Spanish count, sojourning in America with his sister, the Countess Pepita. I was but a boy, and, bewitched by the girl's beauty, was soon engaged to be married to her. Going to her house one evening, and not finding her in the parlors, I passed into the garden in quest of her. Hearing voices in an arbor, and supposing it was she and her brother, I crept upon them, intending to give them a pleasant surprise. Then I learned that she was in reality the wife of the self-styled count, and the sister of a villain who was in company with them.

The plot was simply this:—Immediately after our marriage, the real brother was to appear in the character of a disappointed lover and shoot or stab me, when my money would go to my supposed widow, to be divided among her pals. I was so enraged that I confronted them, on the impulse of the moment. They set upon me, and in self-defense I shot at the count, whom you have known as The Red Hand; but the Countess Pepita, now known as Nebraska Larry, leaped before him, and receiving the shot, sunk, lifeless, as I supposed, in his arms. Knocking down the brother, known as Ricardo del Selano, I escaped. A few weeks ago, I killed him in a duel, in the character of Missouri Bill."

"And, my daughter," said Mr. Kingslake, when Horace Clifton had finished, "will you clear up one mystery? Who is this youth you have called your brother?"

Iola blushed to the roots of her hair, and then laughing, hid her face in her lover's bosom, and said:

"Tell him, Horace, I can't."

"You must know," said Horace, tenderly stroking her hair, "that when I bent over Dauntless Jerry, whom I supposed to be dead, I discovered that it was a woman! My first thought was that it was a sister, which would accord with Iola's statement that Jerry was not her brother. But when I took her into the

hut, she soon revived; for her wound was but a slight one, the bullet ranging along a rib and stunning her for the time. She then astonished me by announcing that she was neither brother nor sister, but Iola's self in disguise. Her mustache was false; the blue specks on cheek and chin were but a skillful imitation of shaven whiskers in paint; her hair, eyebrows and lashes were dyed with a dye which is easily washed off. The discrepancy between long hair and short is accounted for by the fact that, when she conceived the notion of disguising herself as a man, she had her long and beautiful blonde hair cut off and made into a wig, which she could wear in her character of a woman, and leave off when she personated Dauntless Jerry.

"All this was devised by my mother, who had been an actress," pursued Horace, dwelling tenderly and reverently on the title of relationship. "The object of all this was, that as a man Iola could pursue her quest of me freed from the disadvantages she would have had to encounter as a woman. Now she shrinks from having this episode of her life made public, and prefers that the world should believe that her brother died. Of course the grave in the grove is an empty one; since Iola set out for home, to remove her disguise and be ready to receive us in her true character, before I filled it in. I have out to add that on the few occasions when Jerry and his sister were seen together, my mother took the former character, a time being chosen when her features could not be too closely scrutinized."

"My children," said Dr. Chillingworth, gravely, "I have a word in further explanation. In revenge for the slight put upon him, Horace Clifton stole our child, our dear little May, through the instrumentality of his wife, who gained access to our house as nursery governess, under the name of Mrs. Henderson. The woman, as you know, afterward repented, and made such amends to you, my child, as she could, without breaking the oath by which her husband had bound her.

"While explanations are in order," said Iola, "you may care to know that after my rescue from the cave by Nebraska Larry—or perhaps better, by Pepita—I came home here and assumed my disguise as Dauntless Jerry; joined Major Gravesend's party; captured the stronghold; and ambushed the returning robbers."

"By the way, what became of the major?" asked Dr. Chillingworth, with some anxiety.

No one knew; but later in the day the major came to his friend, and taking him by the hand, said:

"Dr. Chillingworth—or I suppose I should call you Mr. Kingslake—I wish to express to you how much I have valued and still value your friendship; and the regret I feel at the necessity of parting from you. But I now come to say good-by; and in ten minutes I shall be on my way to the Far West."

"What! Going away? But you have not seen my daughter. And, major, I wished to have your company at her wedding, which is to be the one happy event in compensation for my long years of suffering."

"Excuse me, my friend. Bear to her my adieus and my earnest wishes for her future happiness."

Perhaps the spasm of pain which shot athwart his bronzed visage gave George Kingslake some perception of the situation. He did not press him further; and they parted with a firm hand-clasp. Then the major mounted his horse, and rode away until he was lost in the splendor of the setting sun, never once looking around.

Reader, what more is there to tell? The wronged are righted in their children. When George Kingslake weeps reverently over a tender memory, his tears are kissed away by a present bright reality; and he forgets the old Horace in the new.

THE END.

OLD

Nick Whiffles' Yarn.

BY CAPT. J. F. C. ADAMS.

THE character of Old Nick Whiffles is happily illustrated in this "yarn," which was told at the bivouac fire of a Hudson's Bay man, on the Saskatchewan. The party, commanded by the noted Captain Green, and accompanied by the celebrated hunter, Oregon Sol, included a couple of young Englishmen named Swoper and Fitzsimmons—the latter "dubbed" Persimmons by the men for his peculiar traits of character. Both were gullible to an extraordinary degree, and many was the joke the rough men played on the adventurers, who were snobs even in the wilderness.

One evening the voyagers put ashore near "Blackfoot Rock," and hardly had prepared their camp when who should come in but Old Nick Whiffles! The camp was all hilarity then, for the odd old hunter was known to every true

trapper and guide from Pembina to the Columbia, and Green gave him such a welcome as he deserved. Though Nick "fought shy" of the Hudson's Bay people, he greatly "froze to" some of their parties, and especially to that of which his "old pard," Oregon Sol, was a leading member. From him he was willing to receive supplies of tobacco and ammunition, and to him was willing to sell his store of choice skins, for Old Nick never bothered "common critters" like wolves and muskrats. He was the beaver hunter *par excellence* of the Northwest, and his stock of furs was sure to be choice.

On this particular occasion it was hardly dark, when the smell of cooking meat filled the air, and the employees of the Hudson Bay Company gathered around the blazing camp-fires to enjoy the food which had been prepared for their evening meal.

It was an interesting and pleasing sight to see these rough, hardy men of the woods, attending to this "duty," with the same earnest vigor that they did to paddling their canoe up and down the Saskatchewan and its branches.

The light from the camp-fires was reflected far out upon the river, and revealed the shadowy outlines of the great mass of stone, on the opposite side the stream, rising to the height of one hundred feet and giving the name to the locality. Grim and huge and silent, it stood like some giant sentinel keeping ward and watch over this gateway to the solitudes of the Northwest.

The meals finished, and the hunters gathered in groups in all the abandon of animal enjoyment, and lolling and lying upon the ground, smoked their pipes, told their stories and quizzed each other.

There was scarcely one among them who was not well acquainted with Nick Whiffles and who was not glad to see him. He had passed around the entire party, shaking hands and exchanging words with each in turn; and now, as the evening was more advanced, he and Oregon Sol, were seated near each other by the upper camp-fire, both in that easy position so natural to hunters. Both were smoking pipes, as indeed was nearly every member of the party, including Captain Green, a dozen trappers, and Fitzsimmons and Swoper, the latter two displaying handsomely carved meerschaums.

Conversation ran along in a desultory sort of way, during which some three or four gave some account of their adventures in different portions of the Northwest, until the evening was pretty well advanced, when Captain Green suddenly turned to Nick with the question:

"Can you tell me why this place is known as Blackfoot Rock? I have often wondered to myself, when I have heard its name mentioned, or have been passing by it. I have asked several of our men, but there are none that can tell me."

"It takes its name from that rock over there," replied Whiffles, indicating the rock to which he referred by a mere glance of his eyes.

"Of course," replied the captain, with a laugh; "but I mean to inquire whether you can tell what the circumstance or legend is that gave the name to the rock itself and by which it has been known for so many years?"

"I heered the story some twenty years ago, when I wasn't quite as old as I am now; it was told me by one of your hunters on the North Fork of the Saskatchewan—Black Diah, that was froze to death the next year, while trapping in Oregon. He had heard it when he was a boy, from another very old hunter, who see'd the circumstances that give rise to the name, so you see I've got it purty straight, but it's a rough story and I'm afeared that if I tell it to you to-night it'll give you a p'ison diffikilty in the way of sleepin' to-night."

This protest, stated in such words, very naturally aroused greater curiosity than ever, and all insisted so strongly upon hearing the story that Nick could not refuse; and filling up his pipe, and assuming the easiest attitude possible, he told the following

LEGEND OF BLACKFOOT ROCK.

"It must have been more than a hundred years ago that the Blackfeet down among the Rocky Mountains of Oregon got into a wrangle over something, and had such a fight that about fifty of 'em had to dig out, to save their skulls, and they started off for some other place, where they might take each other's skulls in peace and quiet, and where they might play all manner of pleasant deviltry, without having other folks interferin' with 'em. It's hard to find such a place in this world, for white, red, or black folks—it is, by mighty! and it was some time afore the animiles could light on such a lovely spot, but they hit it at last, and here was the place."

"Where we are encamped just now?" inquired Captain Green.

"Not quite this one spot alone, but all around here like. I think one of the causes of their settling here was that rock. Have you ever been to the top of it?"

"Never," replied several of the group, looking across the river, at the dimly-seen mass, while the captain added:

"I always supposed from its appearance that

it could not be climbed. It seems to be one perpendicular mass of solid stone."

"So it is in front and the rear looks the same, but there is a place, out of sight till you make a purty good hunt for it, by which you can make your way to the top. I've been to the top a half-dozen times, and when you're up there, you get a bigger view than you ever had afore. I don't know how it is, for we've all been up on the mountains, fifty times higher than that is, and we've all see'd a condemned lot of kentry stretched out before us; but it must be that the land slopes away in every direction from Blackfoot Rock, or else you wouldn't git such a big view from the top of it. But that ain't the question just now, though I've no doubt that it was on that account that this little band of red-skins that I'm telling you 'bout fixed on this neighborhood as the best place for them to enjoy themselves as a real Indian likes to enjoy himself.

"You see they was afeared the rest of their people, that they had sich a condemned diffikilty with, might take it into their heads to foller on arter 'em, and settle up the grudge. So they made it a p'int to have a warrior go up to the top of the rock every morning, noon and night, to see whether any of their old enemies were trying to steal a march onto 'em. 'Cause a winter and summer passed away, without catching a glimpse of any of 'em, they didn't make up their minds that they wasn't never going to come, but they kept their watch just as close as ever.

"So things went on till the dead of winter again, and when that comes in these parts, you know it's winter and no mistake. There ain't any foolin' 'bout it. The Hudson Bay Company owned all the country through here then, and a hundred years before it, just as they own it now, and it wasn't long before these varmints found that they had a pretty good thing of it. Beavers and otters, and foxes, and martins, and all sorts of game was as plenty as anybody could want it to be, and they got good prices for their peltries, so they wouldn't wanted things any nicer, if they could only felt that the other skunks wouldn't come down to raise a condemned diffikilty with 'em.

"'Twas in the dead of winter, when one day just as it was growing dark, the sentinel that climbed to the top of the rock spied a light about ten miles to the south'ard that he had never see'd afore, and which he didn't know what to make of. He signaled to two or three others to come up, and though the night was one of the coldest that they had ever had in this part of the world, they staid on top of the rock till morning, without any fire and with nothing but their blankets, watching that fire and trying to learn what it meant.

"They was a pack of condemned fools to do that, fur a light ten miles off, if it doesn't go out, isn't apt to look like much of anything else at night. It kept burning all the time just the same, so they made up their minds that it was a camp-fire of their enemies, who had started to hunt 'em out."

"I should think that some of their runners would have reconnoitered the camp during the night and found out to a certainty the identity and power of the strangers," remarked Captain Dick, who, like the others, was listening with deep interest to the narrative of the trapper.

That's the identical observation I made to Black Dick when he told me the story, and he said he had remarked the same to the old trapper that had told the yarn when he was a boy, but he didn't get a satisfactory answer. So I can't give you a good reason why the Black-foot didn't do that thing, which it seems would have been very natural for 'em to do. There was plenty of snow on the ground, and they could have made the ten miles there and the ten miles back ag'in without any trouble, but they didn't choose to do it, 'cause I suppose they was sartin' 'nough who the condemned sarpints was without going to all that trouble. Wal, when morning come, about twenty warriors took a squint from the top of the rock, and it didn't need a second glance to see that an amazing war-party of their enemies was coming for 'em dead sure.

"When they see'd that, of course they had a talk as to what was best to do. A good many wanted to pack up and go further north, but the biggest lot said no,—their pursuers could go as far they could, and they would have to make a stand and fight somewhere, and they couldn't get a place as good as this. So they concluded to go up on top of the rock, taking their provisions with 'em, and then their foes might bang away till they got tired.

"They spent all day in getting ready, and when night come, the other Blackfeet to the number of a hundred appeared on this side the river, crossed over on the ice, and surrounded the rock. In the morning, they commenced firing their arrers, and made a rush to get up the rear stairs, but they didn't try it the second time.

"They see'd that nothing could be done in the way of fighting, and so they backed off, and begun a siege of the place, and there's where they had the poor fools that had gone to the top of the rock, fur it had never entered their heads

that that would be the way the business would be fixed.

"As it kept snowing half the time, they managed to keep off thirst, but arter awhile their provisions give out, and then the rough times come. They had swore not to eat each other, as white folks do, when they get cotched foul in the same way, and they kept their oath. When they found that there was no gettin' out of the muss, one of the warriors proposed that they should all commit suicide, and he set the example by jumping from the rock out upon the river. The ice was eighteen inches thick, but he struck it so hard that he made a clean hole, and shot out of sight. The next Blackfoot did the same, aiming so well, that he went exactly into the same hole, and then the others follered, all aiming so straight, that they popped through the opening, one after another, like a lot of sheep jumping over a wall.

"But they didn't all do that. The last one that was left was the biggest warrior of the whole lot. When he walked to the edge of the rock to foller the others, he looked over, at the hole in the ice, a hundred feet below him, into which all his brothers and sisters, and uncles and aunts, and cousins, had gone, and he shook his head, and he said he rather thought not. It was his opinion that the rest was a pack of fools, and he turned back, climbed down the rock, and making his way out among the other Blackfeet, he axed 'em to give him a chaw of tobacker and something to eat.

"You see he'd been up there in the snow and cold so long that he was bleached almost white, and he looked so queer and foolish like that the other red-skins hadn't the heart to hurt him, and so they took him and nursed him and fed him,—but they suffered for it, and it placed them in the condemnedest diffikilty they ever dreamt of. That chap was so hungry he couldn't get 'nough to eat. He put himself outside of everything they could catch and shoot, and done it so fast, that afore they knowed it, all the rest of the Blackfeet had starved to death, and he was alone and master of the situation."

"What become of 'im heventually?" inquired young Swoper.

"Never went under; he's living yet in these parts. I've see'd him often."

"You don't say," remarked Fitzsimmons.

"What does he look like, and how does he act?"

"The last time I see'd him, he was disguised as an Englishman, and was carrying a compass with him and looking south for north, couldn't get 'nough to eat, and went by the name of Per-simmons!"

The laugh that followed was a roar, and the poor Englishman was an astonished man. How had that old wood tramp become possessed not only of his name but of his very peculiarities? How did he know Fitz carried a compass and made it a "point" to eat all that was placed before him? That puzzled the snob and awed him into a silence which only added to the comic effect of the whole proceeding.

Oregon Sol's eyes, if their expression of quiet humor could have been read, would have betrayed Nick's source of information.

With that yarn Green ordered all men to their blankets; and when the morning came, and Fitz looked around for his slanderer, he was nowhere to be seen.

At break of day Old Nick had vanished, even more silently than he had come.

BEAT TIME'S Ordnance Department.

WHEN I was chief of the ordnance department during the war, I spent most of my time, and a good deal of my ingenuity, in perfecting arms.

The first thing which I did was to improve a thirty-two pounder. I improved it greatly—that is to say, I scoured it all over and took the rust off—it was very black.

Next, in view of so many guns being spiked during a battle when the gunners went to dinner, I had a battery of ten guns cast without vents, so there would be no possibility of their ever being spiked. When the battery went into action in the next battle it was discovered that they couldn't touch them off—a little matter that had escaped my mind; so there was nothing left to do but have the guns condemned, or to invent a cartridge that would go off without touching. I had the guns condemned.

Then I invented a carbine that would shoot straight along without stopping. It was a grand success. I armed a regiment with them, but, while they went off whenever you wanted them to, the trouble was they also went off when you didn't want them to. They were afterward used to throw at the enemy, and were found to be very serviceable for that purpose—better than anything else.

I invented a long range rifle—the barrel was eleven feet long—that would accurately shoot clear out of sight. The trouble was, however, that, whenever the soldiers who carried them

got into a fight, they would shoot out of sight themselves. It would hit a man five miles so quick he wouldn't know it; that was the worst of it—he would never find it out.

I reorganized a fuse cannon—that is, I did away with the fuse. However, it was re-fused by the Board.

I invented a very complicated gun, with a view of dispensing with so much powder, but it worked too well; it dispensed with more powder than we could haul to it.

I threw all my energy into the production of a rifle that would astonish the Gods of War themselves, and succeeded. A full description of this wonderful gun would fill two volumes of the size of Webster's Dic., so I won't describe it. It was very complex, and it was also involved in endless complications. But, the corps which was armed with them found, after a very careful test, that the stocks were given to flying off and the balls to staying in the barrel. An order was issued for the guns to be reversed in the next fight, that is, to point the stocks at the enemy and fire, but, so many men were slaughtered in this way, that the foreign nations deemed it contrary to the rules of war, and it was abandoned, at their urgent request.

As revolvers are so apt to go off on all occasions, I perfected a new style which wouldn't go off even when you wanted it to, and the bearers could be just as careless as they pleased. It was a very healthy revolver.

I got up a revolving mitrailleuse, all that was necessary was to attach it to the nearest grindstone and go to work turning the crank. It would shoot in all directions with facility and danger. The trouble about that was, it took so many men to work it. Whenever one took hold to work it he would drop as if he was shot, and upon examination it was found that he certainly was. It would take a regiment of men to work it an hour, and so on up. The soldiers got discouraged, and rather objected to work it; so we allowed it to be captured by the enemy, who fired at us all the next day with it, and then we went over in the evening and buried them all.

I next invented a torpedo, a most beautiful thing as a work of art and a means of death. It was filled with half a barrel of nitro glycerine, and had a percussion-cap on one end of it, and nicely gilt handles at the sides. It was designed to be carried by seven men who, during a battle, would grab it up, run straight to the rebel general's headquarters with it, where he would be sitting on a camp-stool, there set it down, while each of the seven would grab the general forcibly, sit him astride the torpedo and hold him there, while the eighth man, who would be along with a hammer for the purpose, would strike the cap and the rebel general would go to see his grandmother. But, I don't know now what reason the men had for not undertaking the job, although I told them I would send them—not lead them, mind.

What I have done for my country nobody ever will know.

Proudly,
BEAT TIME.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CIGAR.

The devil one day in a sad, listless mood,
Had laid himself down on the edge of a wood;
But, bent on some mischief, he cast his eyes round,
'Spied near him a bunch of coarse leaves in the ground.

And pulled the tough things, which he crushed in his fist,
Then rolled out, and worked at, and gave them a twist.

Then grinned at his work with satanic delight!
With his old brimstone tail he then struck up a light.

Set the end of the weed with a spark all on fire,
And found the result all that man could desire!
The stench that arose was so horribly dreadful,
Bugs, beetles and spiders swooned off by the hand ful.

"Ha, ha," said old Nick, "now I'm off to the city;
I'll kick up a row; if I don't more's the pity."
From that day forth there arose such a din,
Nick wagged his old tail, looked on with a grin,
While now in each household the women made war
'Gainst Satan's invention, the potent cigar.

They were right; for the cash that was squandered that way

All ended at last in the devil to pay.

A DENVER journal records a case where a Chinaman "was frostbitten from this cold world into the rosy future."

A PERSONAL editor, two shot-guns and a flour sack of assorted type, are said to complete the outfit of a Black Hills' newspaper office.

"SEE here, wife! you indulge that boy too much. He is a perfect mule." "Oh husband! please don't accuse our boys of having an ass for a father." The old man was silent.

A MAN who was rather rough in his manners jocosely observed to a young lady that he was about to be married, but as his affections were divided between Miss Mary Brickdust and Miss Betsey Primestuff, he was at a loss which to choose. "I advise you, by all means," said the lady, "to take Miss Brickdust—you want polishing."

The Death-Shot; or, Tracked to Death.

By Capt. Mayne Reid, Author of "Scalp Hunters," etc., etc.

PROLOGUE.

A PRAIRIE, treeless, shrubless, smooth as a sleeping sea. Grass upon it; but so short, that the smallest quadruped might not cross over without being seen. Even a crawling reptile could scarce find concealment among its tufts.

Objects are upon it—sufficiently visible to be distinguished at some distance. But they are of a character scarce deserving a glance from the passing traveler. He would hardly deem it worth while to turn his eyes toward a pack of prairie wolves—*coyotes*—much less go in chase of them.

With vultures soaring above, he might be more disposed to hesitate and reflect. The foul birds and filthy beasts, seen together, would be proof of prey—that some quarry had fallen upon the plain. It might be a stricken stag, a prong-horn antelope, or a wild horse crippled by some mischance due to his headlong nature.

Believing it any of these, the traveler would give loose rein to his steed and ride onward; leaving the beasts and birds to their banquet.

There is no traveler passing over the prairie in question; no human being in sight. But there are wolves grouped upon the ground, and vultures hovering in the air above them.

And not unseen by human eye. For there is one sees—one who has reason to fear them.

Their eager, excited movements show that they are anticipating a repast; at the same time their attitudes tell, they have not yet commenced it.

Something appears in their midst. At intervals they approach it: the birds swooping from above, the beasts crouching along the sward. They go close, almost to touching it,

then suddenly withdraw, starting back as in affright!

After a time they return again, but only to be frayed as before. And so on, in a series of approaches and recessions.

What can be the object thus keeping them off? Surely no common quarry, as the dead body of deer, antelope, or mustang? It cannot be this; nor yet carcass of any kind. It cannot be a thing that is dead. Nor does it look like anything alive. Seen from a distance it resembles a human head; nearer, the resemblance grows stronger; close up, it is complete. Certainly, it is a human head—the head of a man!

What is there to cause surprise? A man's head seen upon a Texan prairie! Nothing, if lying there scalped. It would only prove that some ill-starred individual—traveler, trapper, or hunter of wild horses—has been struck down by the savages; and afterward decapitated, as well as scalped.

But this head—if head it be—is *not* scalped. It still carries its hair—a fine chevelure, waving and profuse. Nor is it lying along the ground, as it naturally would, abandoned, after being despoiled of its trophy. On the contrary, it stands erect upon the sward—the chin almost touching the surface—square, as if still upon the shoulders from which it has been separated! With cheeks pallid or blood-bedaubed, and eyes closed or glassy, this—the position—need not so much surprise. But there is neither pallor nor blood-stain on the cheeks; and the eyes are not closed, not glassed. They are glancing—glaring—rolling. *By heavens! the head is alive!*

No wonder the wolves start back in affright; no wonder the vultures, after swooping down, ply their wings in quick, nervous stroke, and

soar up again! The strange thing seems to puzzle both—baffles their instinct, and keeps them at bay.

Still know they, or seem to fancy, 'tis flesh and blood. Sight and scent tell them it is; by both they cannot be deceived.

And living flesh it must be? A death's head could neither flash its eyes, nor cause them to turn in their sockets. Besides, the predatory creatures have other evidence of its being alive. At intervals there is opened a mouth, showing two rows of white teeth. From between comes a shout that startles and sends them afar.

The cry is only put forth, when they approach too threateningly near—evidently intended to keep them at a distance. It has done so for most part of the day.

Twilight approaching, spreads its purple tints over the prairie. It is on. There is no change in the attitude of the assailed, or assailants. There is light enough to show the flash of those fiery eyes; whose glance of menace still masters the voracious instincts of the animals.

Strange spectacle! The head of a man, without any body—set square upon the ground; with eyes in it that scintillate and see, a mouth that opens, and shows teeth; a throat from which issue sounds evidently of human intonation: around this object of almost supernatural aspect, a group of gray wolves, and over it a flock of black vultures!

Through the day, and into twilight, the tableau remains unchanged. Only a change in the disposition of the figures—in the attitudes of the beasts and birds. The head keeps its place and position. It makes no motion, save the parting of the lips, and the rolling of the eyeballs.



On a Texan prairie twilight is short. There are no mountains or high hills intervening—no obliquity in the sun's diurnal course, to lengthen out the day. When the golden orb sinks behind the horizon, a short-lived light of purplish tint succeeds—then night.

Night approaches. It is on.

With the darkness comes a change. The vultures, obedient to their customary habit—not nocturnal—take departure from the spot, and wing their way to some well-known roosting-place. On the contrary, the wolves stay. Night is the time best suited to their ravening instincts. Under its shadows they may have more hope of at length devouring that thing of spherical shape, that by shouts and scowling glances has so long held them aloof.

To their discomfiture, the twilight is very soon succeeded by a magnificent moon; whose silvery effulgence shed over the prairie almost equals the light of day. It shows the eyes yet angrily glancing; while in the nocturnal stillness that cry, sent through the parted lips, is as awe-inspiring as ever.

It still keeps the assailants at bay.

And, now, more than ever, does the tableau appear strange—more than ever unlike reality. Under the moonlight, with a filmy haze spread over the prairie sward, the human head seems magnified to the dimensions of the sphinx; while, from the same cause, the coyotes look as large as Canadian stags!

In truth, a singular spectacle—one full of weird mystery!

Who can explain it?

CHAPTER I.

TWO SORTS OF SLAVE-OWNERS.

In the old slave-owning times of the Southern United States—happily now no more—there was much grievance to humanity; proud oppression upon the one side, and sad suffering on the other.

It is true, that the majority of the slave proprietors were humane men. Some of them even philanthropic, in their way, and inclined toward giving to the unholy institution a color of *patriarchism*. The idea—delusive, as intended to delude—is old as slavery itself; at the same time, modern as Mormonism; where it has had its latest, and coarsest illustration.

Though it cannot be denied, that the slavery of the States was in many instances of a mild type, neither can it be questioned, that there were cases of lamentable harshness—even to inhumanity. There were slave-owners who were kind, and slave-owners who were cruel.

Not far from the town of Natchez, in the State of Mississippi, lived two planters; whose lives illustrated the extremes of these two types. Though their estates lay adjacent, their characters were as opposite as could well be conceived in the scale of manhood and morality. Colonel Archibald Armstrong—a true Southerner of the old Virginian aristocracy, who had entered Mississippi State when the Choctaw Indians evacuated it—was a model of the kind slave-master; while Ephraim Darke—a Massachusetts man, who had moved thither at a much later period—was a fair specimen of the cruel. Coming from the New England States, sprung from the Puritans—a people whose descendants have made both profession and sacrifice in the cause of negro emancipation—this may seem strange. It is, however, a common tale; which no traveler through the Southern States can help hearing. Every day will be told, that the hardest taskmaster of the slave is either one who has been a slave himself, or a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers, who landed on Plymouth Rock! Having a respect for many points in the character of these same Pilgrim Fathers, I would fain think the accusation untrue, and that Ephraim Darke was an exception.

In his case, there was no falsehood in it—none whatever. Throughout the Mississippi valley, there was nothing more vile than his treatment of the black bondsmen, whose hard lot it was to have him for their master. Around his courts, and in his cotton-fields, the crack of the whip was heard almost continually—its thong sharply felt by the sable-skinned victims of his caprice or malice. The "cowhide" was constantly carried by himself, his son, and overseer. None of the three ever went abroad without that pliant, painted switch—a very emblem of devilish cruelty—in their hands; never came home without having used it in the castigation of some unfortunate "darkey," whose evil star had thrown him in their track, while making the rounds of the plantation.

It was the very reverse with his neighbor, Archibald Armstrong—whose slaves seldom went to bed without a prayer upon their lips, that said, "God bless de good massa;" while the poor whipped bondmen of Ephraim Darke, their backs still smarting from the lash, nightly lay down, not always to sleep, but always with curses on their lips.

Alas! the old story, of like cause bringing about like result, is what must be chronicled in this case. The man of the Devil prospered; while he of God decayed. Colonel Armstrong, open-hearted, generous, indulging in a profuse hospitality, lived outside the income accruing

from the culture of his cotton-fields. In time he became the debtor of Ephraim Darke, who lived within his.

There was not much intimacy or friendship between the two men. The proud Virginian, come of an old Highland family—gentry in the colonial times—felt some contempt for his neighbor, a descendant of the Mayflower steerage passengers.

For all this, he was not above accepting a loan from Darke, which the latter had been eager to give. The Massachusetts man had long coveted the Southerner's fine estate; and knew that a mortgage-deed is the first entering of a wedge, in time pretty sure to bring about possession of the *fee simple*.

So stood things between these two neighboring planters. Darke had determined on becoming the proprietor of both plantations; while the affairs of Armstrong, gradually growing desperate, had at length reached a point that promised his neighbor all he had been scheming to obtain. The debtor had fallen behind in the payment of interest. The mortgage could at any moment be foreclosed. Colonel Armstrong was in danger of losing his estate.

At this crisis came a circumstance, likely to modify, if not altogether defeat, the design of the creditor. Ephraim Darke had a son approaching manhood, by name Richard, by nature like himself, only of a still inferior type of humanity. For the grasping selfishness of the extreme Puritan is not improved by mixture with the opposite extreme of Southern licentiousness; and in the character of Richard Darke the two were commingled. Mean in the matter of personal expenditure, he was at the same time of dissipated and disorderly habits; the associate of the poker-playing and cock-fighting fraternity of the neighborhood; one of its wildest youth, without any of those generous traits sometimes coupled with such a character.

He was Ephraim Darke's only son—therefore heir-presumptive to all his property—slaves and plantation. Being thoroughly in his father's confidence, he was aware of the probability of a proximate reversion to the slaves and plantation of Colonel Armstrong.

But, much as Richard Darke liked money, there was something he coveted more. This was Colonel Armstrong's daughter. There were two of them, Helen and Jessie, both pretty girls. Helen, the elder, was more than pretty, she was beautiful—by all acknowledged as the beauty of the neighborhood.

Richard Darke was in love with her, as much as his selfish heart would allow—perhaps the only unselfish passion he had ever felt. His father sanctioned, or at all events did not oppose it. For this wild, wicked youth had gained a wonderful ascendancy over a parent, who had trained him to trickery equaling his own.

With the power of creditor over debtor—a debt that could be demanded at any moment—a mortgage to the full amount and not easily transferred—the Darkes seemed to have the vantage-ground, and might dictate their own terms.

The son had been for some time paying his attentions to Helen Armstrong, whenever an opportunity occurred—at balls, *barbecues*, and the like; of late, also, at her father's house. There, the power spoken of gave him admittance; while the consciousness of possessing it, hindered him from noticing the reluctance with which he was received. For all, he could not fail to perceive, that his assiduities were coldly met by her to whom his homage was extended.

He wondered why, too. He knew that Helen Armstrong had many admirers. It could not be otherwise with one so beautiful, and, beside, so gifted. But among them there was none for whom she had shown the slightest partiality. This was notorious. Darke himself had conceived a suspicion, that a young man, named Clancy—son of a decayed Irish gentleman, living near—had found favor in her eyes. Still, it was but a suspicion; and Clancy had gone to Texas the year before—sent, it was said, by his father, to look out for a new home. The latter had since died, leaving his widow sole occupant of an humble tenement, with a small holding of land near the borders of the Armstrong estate.

There was a report that young Clancy was soon coming back—was, indeed, every day expected. But what could it matter? The proud planter, Armstrong, was not the man to bestow his daughter upon a "poor white"—as Richard Darke scornfully styled his suspected rival.

Feeling confident of this, as also in the vantage-ground he himself held, the suitor of Helen Armstrong had resolved upon bringing things to an issue. His love for her had become a passion, the stronger for being checked. Her coldness might be but coquetry. He hoped and fancied it was; for he had no lack of either self-esteem or assurance. And he had reason for both. He was immensely rich, or would be when his father died. He was not ill-looking, but rather the reverse; and he had made more than one conquest among the young ladies of the neighborhood. It might be, Miss Armstrong's haughty disposition hindered her from being demonstrative? Perhaps she loved him without giving sign?

For months he had been cogitating in this un-

certain way, and had at length determined to bring matters to a crisis.

One morning he mounted his horse; rode across the boundary-line between the two plantations, and on to Colonel Armstrong's house; requested an interview with the colonel's eldest daughter; obtained it; made a declaration of his love; asked her to have him for a husband; and received for response a chilling negative.

As he went back through the woods, the birds were trilling among the trees. It was their merry morning lay, but it gave him no gladness. There was still ringing in his ears that harsh monosyllable "*no*." The wild-wood songsters seemed to echo it, as if mockingly; the blue jay and red cardinal scolding him for intrusion on their domain.

After crossing the boundary between the two plantations, he reined up his horse, and looked back. His brow was black with chagrin; his lips white with rage. It was suppressed no longer. Curses came hissing through his teeth, along with the words—

"In less than six weeks these woods will be mine; and d—me if I don't shoot every bird that roosts in them! Then, Miss Helen Armstrong, you'll not be so conceited of yourself. It will be different, when you haven't got a roof over your head! So good-by, sweetheart; good-by to you!"

"Now, dad!" he continued, in fancy apostrophizing his father, "now you can take your own way, as you've been long wanting. Yes, my respected parent; you are free to put in the execution—the sheriff's officers—anything you like."

Angrily grinding his teeth, he dug the spurs into his horse's ribs, and rode on—the short bitter syllable still ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER II.

TWO GOOD GIRLS.

RICHARD DARKE had not long parted from the presence of the lady who so laconically rejected him, when another stood by her side.

A man also, though no rival to him,—neither lover nor suitor. The venerable white-haired gentleman, who came into the room, was Helen Armstrong's father.

His voice, on entering, told that he had a suspicion of what had been Darke's errand.

He was soon made certain by his daughter freely confessing it.

He said in reply:

"I supposed that to be the fellow's purpose; though, at such an early hour, I might have feared its being worse."

"Worse! Feared! Father, what could you have feared?"

"Never mind, Helen; nothing that concerns you. Tell me: in what way did you give him the answer?"

"In one little word. I simply said *no*."

"That little word will be enough. Oh Heaven! what will become of us?"

"Father!" exclaimed the beautiful girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder, with a searching look into his eyes; "why do you speak thus? Are you angry with me for refusing him? Surely you would not wish me to be the wife of Richard Darke?"

"You do not love him, Helen?"

"Love him! Can you ask? Who could love that man?"

"Then you would not marry him?"

"Would not—I could not. He has no heart but the heart of a villain. I would prefer death to such a husband as he."

"Enough. I must submit to my fate—to ruin."

"Ruin! Father; what is the meaning of this? There is some secret—some danger. Trust me, dear father! Let me know what it is!"

"I may well do that, since it cannot be much longer a secret. There is danger, Helen—the danger of debt. I am in debt to the father of Richard Darke—deeply so—completely in his power. Everything I possess, land, houses, slaves, may become his at any hour; to-morrow, if he will it. Nay, he is sure to will it, now. Your little word '*No*' will bring about a great change—the crisis I have been so long apprehending. Never mind! Let it come. I must meet it like a man. It is for you, dear Helen—you and Jessie, that I grieve. Poor girls, what a change in your prospects! Poverty, coarse fare, coarse garments to wear, and a log cabin to live in. Henceforth, this must be your lot. I can hope for no other."

"And what of all that, father? What care we? I, for one, do not; and I'm sure sister will say the same. But is there no way to—"

"Release me from debt, you would say? You need not ask that. I have spent many a sleepless night over it. No; there was only that one way. I never before spoke, or even thought, of it. I knew it would not do. I knew you did not love Richard Darke, and would not consent to marry him. You could not, my child—could you?"

Helen Armstrong did not make immediate answer; though she had one in her heart, ready to leap to her lips.

Marry Richard Darke! Wretch, worthless, with all his riches; dissipated, wicked of soul, craven of spirit, coward as she deemed him!

Marry such a man, while another man that to her seemed possessed of every noble quality, beauty of person, boldness of spirit, purity of heart—in short, everything that makes heroism! This other man, too, having confessed that he loved her! To such as she it made no difference about his being poor in purse, which he was; nor would it, had he been beneath her in social rank, which he was not. Her answer would have been all the same; and she only hesitated giving it, from a thought that it might add to the weight of unhappiness at the moment pressing upon her father.

Mistaking her silence, and perhaps with the specter of poverty before him—inciting to meanness, as it oft does the noblest natures—he said:

"Helen! could you marry him?"

He meant Richard Darke.

"Speak candidly," he continued, "and take time to reflect before answering. If you think you could not be contented, happy, with him for your husband, better it should never be.

—another girl, almost beautiful as herself, only a year or two younger.

"Not only *my* affection," she said, at sight of the new comer, "but Jessie's as well. Won't he, sister?"

Jessie, wondering what it was all about, nevertheless saw that something was wanted of her. She had caught the word "affection," at the same time observing the troubled expression upon her father's face. This, with her sister's attitude, decided her; and, gliding forward, in another instant she was by his side, clinging to the opposite shoulder; she too, with one hand rested gently upon his head.

Thus grouped, the three figures composed a family picture, expressive of purest love. The white-haired, white-mustached colonel, veteran of more than one campaign, in the center; on each side a fair girl, twining alabaster arms around his neck. And yet the two different as if no kinship existed between them—Helen of gipsy darkness, Jessie, bright as a summer beam.

having little else to do, passed a good deal of his time scouring the country in pursuit of his father's advertised runaways. Having caught them, he would claim the "bounty," just as if they belonged to a stranger. Darke *pere* paid it without grudge or grumbling—perhaps the only disbursement he ever made in such mood. It was like taking out of one pocket to put into the other. Besides, he was rather proud of his son's acquitting himself so shrewdly.

Skirting the two plantations, with others in the same line of settlements, was a cypress swamp. It extended along the edge of the great river, covering an area of many square miles. Beside being a swamp, it was a network of creeks, bayous, and lagoons, often inundated, and only passable by means of skiff or canoe. In most places it was a slough of soft mud, where man might not tread, nor any kind of water-craft make way. Over it, at all times, hung the obscurity of twilight. The solar rays, however bright above, could not penetrate its thick canopy of cypress tops, loaded with



"SHE SENT IT ME THIS VERY MORNING. COME, CLANCY! TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK OF THE LIKENESS?"—Page 31.

Consult your own heart, my child, and do not be swayed by me or my necessities. Say, *could you marry him?*"

"Father, I have said. You have spoken of a change in our circumstances—of poverty, and other ills. Let them come! For myself I care not. Only for you. But if to me the alternative were death, I've told you, dear father—I tell you again—I would rather that than be the wife of Richard Darke."

"Then his wife you shall never be! Let the subject drop. Let the ruin fall! Now to prepare ourselves for poverty and Texas!"

"Texas, if you will, but not poverty. No, father, not that. The wealth of affection will make you feel rich; and in a lowly hut, as in this our grand mansion, you shall still have mine."

On saying this, the beautiful girl flung herself upon her father's breast, one hand resting upon his shoulder, the other laid gently on his head.

The door opened. Another entered the room

It would have been a pleasing tableau to one who knew nothing of what had brought the three thus together; or even knowing this, to him truly comprehending it. For in the faces of all beamed affection, that bespoke well for their future, and showed no distrustful fear of either poverty or Texas.

CHAPTER III.

A FOREST POST-BOX.

EPHRAIM DARKE's harsh treatment of his slaves had the usual effect—it caused them occasionally to "abscond." Then it became necessary to insert an advertisement in the country newspaper, offering a reward for the runaways. Thus cruelty proved expensive.

In planter Darke's case, however, the cost was partially recouped by the cleverness of his son, who was a noted "nigger-catcher," and kept dogs for the especial purpose. He had a natural *penchant* for this kind of chase; and,

that strangest of parasitical plants, the *tillandsia usneoides*.

This tract of forest offered a safe place of concealment for runaway slaves; and as such was it noted throughout the neighborhood. A "darkey" absconding from any of the near-lying plantations was as sure to make for it, as would a chased rabbit for its warren.

Somber and gloomy though it was, around its edge was the favorite scouting-ground of Richard Darke. To him the cypress swamp was a preserve, as a coppice to the pheasant-shooter, or a scrubwood to the hunter of foxes. With the difference, that his game was human, and therefore the pursuit of it more exciting.

There were places in the swamp to which he had never penetrated—large tracts unexplored, and where exploration could not be made without much difficulty. But to enter the swamp was not absolutely necessary. The slaves, who sought asylum there, could not always remain within its gloomy recesses. Food must be ob-

tained beyond its border, or starvation would be their fate. For this reason the refugee required some mode of communicating with the outside world. It was usually by means of a confederate—some old friend and fellow-slave upon one of the adjacent plantations—privity to the secret of his hiding-place. On this necessity the negro-catcher most depended; having often found the stalk—or “still-hunt,” in backwoods phraseology—more profitable than a pursuit with trained hounds.

About a month after his rejection by Miss Armstrong, Richard Darke was out upon a chase, as usual along the edge of the cypress swamp. Rather should it be called a search; since he had found no traces of the game that had tempted him forth. This was a fugitive negro—one of the best field-hands belonging to his father's plantation—who had absconded, and could not be found.

For several weeks “Jupiter,” as the runaway was called, had been missing; and his description, with the reward attached, had appeared in the county newspaper. Richard Darke, having suspicion that he was hiding somewhere in the swamp, had made several excursions thither, in the hope of lighting upon his tracks. But Jupiter was an astute fellow, and had hitherto contrived to leave no trace that could in any way contribute to his capture.

Darke was returning home, after an unsuccessful day's search, in anything but a pleasant mood. It was not so much from having failed in obtaining traces of the missing slave. That was but a matter of money; and, as he had plenty, the disappointment could be borne. It was the thought of Helen Armstrong—of his scorned suit and blighted love prospects—that gave austerity to his reflections.

They had been further embittered by a circumstance that had since occurred. Charles Clancy had returned from Texas. Some one had told Darke of his being seen with Helen Armstrong—alone. Such an interview could not have been with her father's consent, but clandestine. So much the more aggravating to him—Dick Darke.

He had left the swamp behind, and was making his way through a tract of woodland which separated his father's plantation from that of his neighbor, when he saw something that promised relief to his perturbed spirit. It was a woman coming through the woods, and from the direction of Colonel Armstrong's house.

It was not Colonel Armstrong's daughter. He did not for a moment suppose it was she. Not likely, in such a solitary place, so far from the plantation-house. But, if not the young lady herself, it was her representative—her maid—a mulatto girl named Julia. Darke recognized her at a glance, even in the far distance and under the dim shadow of the trees.

“Thank God for the devil's luck!” he muttered, as the girl first came in sight. “It's Jupiter's sweetheart; his Juno or Leda, yellow-skinned like himself. There can be no doubt about her being on the way to keep an appointment with him. No more than I shall be present at that interview. Two hundred dollars reward for old Jude, and the fun of giving the d—d nigger a good hiding, once I have him home. Keep on, Jupe, my girl! You'll track him up for me better than the best bloodhound in my kennel.”

While making this soliloquy, the speaker withdrew himself behind a bush; and, concealed by its thick foliage, kept his eye on the mulatto wench, still wending her way among the tree trunks.

There was no path, and she was evidently proceeding by stealth—giving him reason to believe she was on the errand conjectured.

Richard Darke had no doubt of her being *en route* to an interview with Jupe; and he felt as good as certain of soon discovering, and securing, the runaway who had so long contrived to elude him.

When the girl had passed the place of his concealment—which she soon after did—he slipped out from behind the bush, and followed her with stealthy tread, taking care to keep cover between them.

It was not long before she came to a stop; under a grand magnolia, whose spreading branches, with their large, laurel-like leaves, shadowed a vast circumference of ground.

Darke, who had again taken stand behind some bushes, where he had a full view of her movements, watched them with eager eyes. Two hundred dollars at stake—two hundred for himself, fifteen hundred for his father—Jupe's market value—no wonder he was on the alert.

What was his astonishment, on seeing the girl take a letter from her pocket, and, standing on tiptoe, drop it into a knot-hole in the magnolia!

This done, she turned her back upon the tree; and, without staying longer under its shadow, started back along the path by which she had come—evidently going home again.

The negro-catcher was not only surprised, but chagrined. A double disappointment—the anticipation of earning two hundred dollars and giving his old slave the lash—both pleasant, both foiled!

Still remaining in concealment, he permitted the girl to go unmolested; not moving till she

was quite out of his sight. There might be some secret in the letter to concern, perhaps console, him. If so, it would soon be his.

And it soon was his, though not to console him. Whatever were the contents of that epistle, so cunningly deposited, Richard Darke, on becoming acquainted with them, reeled like a drunken man, and, to save himself from falling, sought support against the tree.

After a time, recovering, he re-read the letter, and gazed at a picture—a photograph—which the envelope also inclosed.

Then from his lips came speech, low-muttered—words of fearful menace, made emphatic by an oath.

A man's name might have been heard among his mutterings. It was Charles Clancy.

As he strode away from the spot, the firm-set lips, with the angry scintillation of his eyes, told that Clancy's life was in danger.

CHAPTER IV.

A PHOTOGRAPH IN THE FOREST.

ON the third day after that when Richard Drake had abstracted the letter from the magnolia, a man was seen making his way along the edge of the cypress swamp. It was about the same hour of the evening, though the individual was altogether different. A young man, also; but unlike to Dick Darke as two men of similar age could well be to one another. In personal appearance, he was Darke's superior; in keenness of intellect, his equal; in morality, the very opposite. A figure of medium height, with limbs tersely set, and well proportioned, told of great strength; an elastic tread betokened activity; while features finely balanced, with an eagle eye and curving lips, proclaimed the possession of courage, equal to any demand that might be made upon it. A grand shock of waving hair, dark brown in color, gave the finishing touch to this fine countenance, as does the feather to a Tyrolean hat. He who possessed it was habited in a hunting costume; not for the chase on horseback, but afoot. He wore a shooting-coat of strong stuff, with short jack-boots, and gaiters buttoned above them. His hat was felt, with ibis feathers for a plume. In his hand he carried a gun, that at a glance could be seen to be a rifle; while by his side slouched a large dog—a cross between stag-hound and mastiff, with a touch of the terrier commingled. Such mongrel dogs are not always curs, but often the best for backwoods hunting, where keenness of scent needs to be supplemented by strength and stanchness.

It was Charles Clancy who was thus armed and attended. As already said, he was afoot, walking by the side of the cypress swamp. It was about two weeks after his return from Texas. He had come back to find himself fatherless; and since that stayed much at home to console his sorrowing mother. Only now and then had he gone forth to seek relaxation in the chase, and only on short excursions through the nearest tract of woodland. On this occasion he was returning with an empty game-bag; but in no way chagrined by his ill-success. For he had something else to console him; that which gave gladness to his heart—joy of the sweetest. She who had won that heart—Helen Armstrong—loved him. She had not told him so much in words; but there had been acts equally expressive, and to the full as convincing. They had met clandestinely, and in the same way corresponded; a tree in the forest serving them for post-office. All this through fear of her father. In the letters thus surreptitiously exchanged, only phrases of friendship had passed between them. But at their last meeting, Clancy had spoken words of love—fervent love, in its last appeal. He had avowed himself hers, and asked her to be his. She had resisted giving him an answer upon the spot, but promised it in writing. He would receive it in a letter, to be found in their forest post-office.

He was not dismayed at being thus put off. He supposed it to be but a whim of his sweetheart. He knew that, like the Anne Hathaway of Shakespeare, Helen Armstrong “had a way” of her own; for she was a girl of no ordinary character. Born and brought up in the backwoods, she possessed a spirit, free and independent, in keeping with the scenes and people that had surrounded her youth. So far from being deterred by her refusal to give him an immediate answer, Clancy but admired her the more. A proud she-eagle, that would not condescend to the soft cooing of the dove—even to speak acquiescence.

This would come in time—in a way not common—in the letter she had promised him. He would find that in the knot-hole of the magnolia.

And now, his day's hunting done, he was making his way for the tract of woodland in which stood the tree—proceeding toward it along the edge of the swamp.

He had no thought of stopping, or turning aside; nor would he have done so for any small game. But at that moment a deer—a grand antlered stag—hove in sight, heading in toward the swamp. Before Clancy could bring the gun to his shoulder, it passed the place where he

stood, loping on among the trunks of the trees. As it ran apparently unscared, he had hopes of again getting sight of it; and thus allured, he swerved out of his track, and went stalking after.

He had not proceeded above twenty paces, when a sound filled his ears, as well as the woods around. It was the report of a gun fired by some one almost beside him. And not at the deer, but himself! The shot came from behind, and he knew it had hit him. This, from a stinging sensation in his arm, like the touch of red-hot iron, or a drop of scalding water. Even then he might not have known it to be a bullet, but for the crack close following.

The wound—fortunately but a slight one—did not disable him. Like a tiger stung by javelins, he was round in an instant, ready to return the fire. There was no one in sight!

As there had been no warning—not a word—he could have no doubt of the intent: some one meant to murder him!

The report was that of a smoothbore—a fowling-piece loaded with ball. A conclusion quickly drawn hindered him from having any conjecture as to who had fired the shot, or why it had been fired. He was not traveling on a road frequented by robbers, but through a tract of timber in the Mississippi Bottom. He was sure of its being an attempt to assassinate him, and that there was but one man in the world capable of making it. Richard Darke was in his thoughts, as if the report of the gun had been a voice pronouncing his name.

Clancy's eyes, flashing angrily, interrogated the forest. The trees stood thick, the spaces between shadowy and somber. For it was a forest of cypresses, and the hour twilight.

He could see nothing but the tree-trunks and their branches, garlanded with the ghostly tillandsia, here and there draping to the ground. It baffled him, by its color and form—the gray festoonery having a resemblance to ascending smoke. He was looking for the smoke of the discharged gun.

He could see none. It must have puffed up suddenly to the tree-tops, and become commingled with the moss.

It did not matter much. Neither the darkness nor the close-standing trunks, hindered his dog from discovering the whereabouts of the would-be assassin. Giving a yelp, the animal sprang out, and off.

Before going twenty paces from the spot, it brought up aside the trunk of a tree, and there stood fiercely baying as if at a bear. The tree was a huge buttressed cypress, with “knees” several feet in height rising around. In the obscurity they might have been mistaken for men.

Clancy was soon among them; and saw standing, between two pilasters, the man who had meant to murder him.

There could be no question about the intent; and the motive was equally understood.

There was no effort at explanation. Clancy called for none. His rifle was already cocked; and, quick upon the identification of his adversary, came to his shoulder.

“Richard Darke!” he cried, “you've had the first shot. It's my turn now.”

As he spoke his finger pressed the trigger, and the bullet sped.

Darke, on seeing himself discovered, leaped out from his lurking-place to obtain more freedom of action. The buttresses hindered him from having elbow-room. He also raised his gun—a double-barrel; but, thinking it too late, instead of pulling the trigger he lowered the piece again, and dodged back behind the tree. His movement, almost simultaneous with Clancy's shot, was quick enough to save him. The ball passed through the skirt of his coat, without drawing blood, or even creasing his skin.

He sprang out again with a shout of triumph, his gun still cocked and ready.

Deliberately bringing the butt against his shoulder—for he was now sure of his victim—he said, in a derisive tone:—

“You're a clumsy fellow, Clancy! A sorry marksman, to miss a man not six feet from the muzzle of your gun! I shan't miss you. Shot for shot's fair play. I've had the first, and I'll have the last. Now, take your *death shot*!”

As he said the words, a fiery jet streamed from his left-hand barrel.

For the moment Clancy was invisible, the sulphurous smoke forming a nimbus around him. When it ascended, he was seen prostrate upon the earth; the blood, welling from a wound in his breast, having already saturated his shirt!

He appeared to be writhing in his death agony.

He must have thought so himself, from the words that came through his lips, in slow, choking utterance:

“May God forgive you, Richard Darke—you have killed—murdered me!”

“I meant to do it,” was the un pitying response.

“Oh heavens!—wicked wretch—why—why—”

“Bah! You know the why, well enough. Helen Armstrong, if you like to hear it. After all, it wasn't that's made me kill you; but your impudence, thinking you had a chance with

her. You hadn't; she never cared a straw for you. Perhaps, before dying, it may be a consolation for you to know she never did. I've got the proof. Since it's not likely you'll ever see her again, it may give you a pleasure to look at her portrait. Here it is! The sweet girl sent it me this very morning, with her autograph attached, as you see. I think it an excellent likeness. What think you? You will, no doubt, give an unbiased opinion. One in your condition should speak candidly."

The ruffian held a photograph before the eyes of the dying man. They were growing dim; but only death could have dimmed them, so as not to see that sun-painted picture, the portrait of her he loved.

He gazed upon it lovingly, but not long. The script underneath claimed his attention. In it he recognized her handwriting known to him. The fear of death itself was naught to the despair that swept through his soul, as, with fast-flicking eyes he deciphered the words—

"Helen Armstrong.—For him she loves."

The picture was in the possession of Richard Darke. To Darke, then, had the words been addressed.

"The sweet creature!" repeated the latter, pouring the bitter speech into his victim's ear. "She sent it me this very morning. Come, Clancy! tell me what you think of the likeness?"

There was no response—neither by word, look, nor gesture. Clancy's lips were mute; his eyes glassed over; his body motionless as the mud on which it lay.

"D—n him, he's dead!"

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE CYPRESS.

"D—n him, he's dead!"

It was Richard Darke who gave utterance to the speech, blasphemous as brutal.

Profanity and brutality had been the characteristics of his life. To these he had now added a crime of deeper dye—murder.

And without remorse. As he bent over the lifeless form of his rival there was no resemblance of contrition, either in glance or gesture. On the contrary, his dark animal eyes were still sparkling with jealous hate, while his hand clutched the hilt of his bowie-knife. He had half drawn it from its sheath, as if to plunge it into the body. He saw it was already breathless—almost bloodless.

"What need? The man's dead."

And with this reflection, he pushed the blade back.

Now for the first time a thought of danger flashed across his brain. A sense of fear began to shape itself in his soul. For, beyond doubt, he had done murder!

"No!" he said, in an attempt at self-justification. "It's no murder. I've killed him, that's true; but he's had a shot at me. I can show that his gun is discharged, and here's his bullet-hole through the skirt of my coat. By thunder, it was a close shave!"

His eyes rested for a moment on the perforated skirt—only a moment. His uneasiness came back, and he continued to shape self-excuses.

"Bah! It was a fair fight. The thing happens every day in the streets. What difference whether it's among trees or houses? What difference—only that there were no witnesses? Well, what if there were none?"

The assassin stood reflecting—his glance now bent upon the body, now sent searching through the trees, as if afraid that some one might come along.

There was not much danger of this. The spot was one of perfect solitude, as is always a cypress forest. There was no path near, to be trodden by the wayfarer. The planter had no business among those great buttressed trunks. The woodman could never assail them with his ax. Only a stalking hunter, or perhaps some runaway slave, would be likely to stray thither.

Richard Darke soliloquized as follows:

"Shall I put a bold face upon it, and confess that I killed him? I can say we met while out hunting; that it's been a fair fight—shot for shot; my luck to have the last. Will that story stand?"

A pause in the soliloquy; a glance at the corpse; another that interrogated the surrounding scene, taking in the huge unshapely trunks, the long outstretched limbs, with their pall-like festoonery of Spanish moss; a thought about the loneliness of the place; its fitness for concealing a dead body; then a reflection as to the social status of the man he had murdered. All these passed through the mind of the murderer, diverting him from his half-formed resolution—admonishing him of its futility.

"It won't do," he went on, his words denoting the change. "No, that it won't! Better say nothing about him. He has no friends who'll inquire what's become of him; only his old mother. As for Helen Armstrong, will she—Ach!"

The ejaculation betrayed extreme acerbity of spirit, as if called up by the name. Strange, with such a sweet love-token lying along his breast!

He again glanced inquiringly round, this time with a view to secreting the corpse. He had made up his mind to do this.

A sluggish creek meandered among the trees, passing at some two hundred yards from the spot. At about a like distance below, it discharged itself into the stagnant reservoirs of the swamp.

Its waters were dark, from the overshadowing of the cypresses, and deep enough for such purpose as he was planning.

But to carry the body to it would require an effort of strength; and to drag it would leave traces.

In view of this difficulty, he said to himself:

"I'll let it stay where it is. No one ever comes this way; not likely. It may lie there till doomsday, or till the wolves and buzzards make bare bones of it. Then who can tell whose bones they are? Ah! better still, I'll throw some of this moss over it, and scatter more around. That will hide everything."

He rested his gun against a tree, and commenced dragging the beard-like parasite from the branches above. It came off in flakes—in armfuls. Half a dozen he flung over the still palpitating corpse; then pitched on the top some pieces of dead wood, lest a stray breeze might strip off the hoary shroud.

After strewing some tufts around, to conceal the blood and boot tracks, he stood for a time making survey of the scene.

At length satisfied, he again laid hold of his gun, and was about taking departure from the place, when a sound, falling upon his ear, caused him to start. Well was it calculated to do so: for it was as the voice of one wailing for the dead!

At first he was badly scared, but got over it on discovering the cause.

"Only the dog!" he said, as he saw Clancy's deerhound skulking among the trees.

On its master being shot down the animal had scampered off, perhaps fearing a similar fate. It had not gone far, and was now returning—little by little, drawing nearer to the spot.

The poor brute was struggling between two instincts—affection for its fallen master, and fear for its own life.

As Darke's gun was now empty, he tried to entice the creature within reach of his knife.

With all his wheedling, it would not come.

Hastily ramming a cartridge into one of the barrels, he took aim at the animal, and fired.

The shot had effect; the ball passing through the fleshy part of the dog's neck. But only to crease the skin and draw out a spurt of blood. The animal, stung and still further affrighted, gave out a wild howl, and went off, without sign of stay or return.

Equally wild were the words that proceeded from the lips of the assassin, as he stood looking after. They were interrogative.

"The d—d cur 'll go home to the house? He'll tell a tale—perhaps guide people to the spot?"

As he spoke, the murderer turned pale. It was the first time he had experienced real fear. In such an out-of-the-way place he had felt safe about concealing the body, and along with it his bloody deed. Then, he had not taken the dog into account, and the odds were in his favor. But now, with the animal adrift, they were heavily against him.

It needed no calculation of chances to make this clear. Nor was it a doubt which caused him to stand hesitating. His irresolution came partly from affright, partly from uncertainty as to what course he should pursue.

One thing was certain—he could not stay there. The hound had gone off howling. It was two miles to the nearest plantation house; but there was an odd squatter's cabin and clearing between. A dog going in that guise, blood-draggled, and in full cry of distress, would be certain to raise an alarm. Equally certain to beget apprehensions for the safety of its missing master, and cause search to be made.

Richard Darke did not long stand thinking. Despite its solitude, it was not the place for tranquil thought—not for him. Far off through the trees he could hear the wail of the wounded Molossian. Was it fancy, or did he also hear men's voices?

He stayed not to ascertain. Beside that corpse, shrouded though it was, he dared not remain a moment longer.

Hastily shouldering his gun, he struck off through the forest; at first going in quick step; then in double; increasing to a run, impelled to this speed not by the howls of the hound, but the fancy that he heard human voices.

He retreated in a direction opposite to that taken by the dog. It was also opposite to the way leading to his father's house. It forced him still further into the swamp—across sloughs and through soft mud, where he made foot-marks. Though he had carefully concealed the body, and obliterated all other traces of the strife, in his "scare" he did not think of those he was now leaving.

The murderer is only cunning before the crime. After it, if he have conscience—or rather, having not courage and coolness—he loses self-possession, and is sure to leave clues for the detective.

So was it with Richard Darke. As he retreated from the scene of his diabolical deed, taking long strides, his only thought was to put space

between himself and that accursed crying cur. So he anathematized the animal, whose cries appeared commingling with the shouts of men—the voices of avengers!

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When she awoke it was with a startled scream.
The vast plain was as light as day.
'Way off to the north, to the south, to the east and west—in fact, all around her,
circled an awful seething sea of flame.
The outlaw had kept his word.
"Oh, God!" cried the girl, her great hazel eyes upraised to the starlit heaven,
"hear me swear unto you that, as sure as there is a God and a ruling power on
earth, I will have revenge for this heartless act of the outlaw chief and his mur-
derous gang. Ay, revenge! revenge! Though I must leave the bodies of my
parents to roast in the flames, I will escape and live to spill the blood of every
accursed wretch who was with Bob Woolf to-day; and will reserve him for my
last victim. Girl though I am, and young and feeble, I will sweep like a hurri-
cane into the robbers' ranks, and take a life for every word that the desperado
chief uttered ten hours ago! I swear it! before high heaven! I swear it!"

A heavy north wind had risen, and this, together with the roar and crackle
of the great fire, made a noise not unlike the raging voice of the tornado.

Far away to the south, speeding with the wind, like a startled deer, she fol-
lowed close in the wake of the southern boundary of the fire, now here, then
there, and like the veritable hurricane, she swept on everywhere. She was
between two fires, both wafted in the same direction.

He was considering what to do, when a strange sound attracted his attention.
It came from the dark leaf coverts among the branches of the tree, at the foot
of which slept Long Snout.

With eager eyes Cecil watched, and strained his ear to catch any other sound
that might be made.

The lower branches of the tree were only about three feet above Long Snout's
head, and were so large that only a heavy weight, or shock, could jar them.

Presently a pebble dropped through the leaves and fell at the sentinel's feet.
But he did not awake.

The next instant a body swung down into mid-air, headforemost, the feet and
legs being locked about the limb above, and the head and shoulders were brought
on a level with those of the Indian.

In a second the plump, muscular arms were straightened down, one hand
clutched the sleeping Long Snout by the throat, and the other, which contained
a long knife, drove the glittering blade repeatedly to the hilt in the bared breast.
The redskin writhed and twisted fiercely, but could not break away, or even yell,
for the grip about his windpipe was like a twisted cord. He sunk down, quietly,
the blood spurting from every gash in streams. Quickly the assailant returned
his knife to his belt, and drew an iron-stamp from an inner pocket, shaped like a
half-moon, which, after dipping into the life-blood of Long Snout, was brought
forcibly down upon the forehead, leaving a bloody impression—a gory half-moon.

In an instant more the strange avenger had disappeared up among the
branches, silently, like a thing of shadow.

Even as he spoke he felt something drop over his shoulders and then tighten
about his waist. 'Twas a lasso. The next moment he began to rise, and was
pulled rapidly up among the branches.

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